

The Philosophy of Ethics

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Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi

**Translated by
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This text is an in-depth analysis of ethics and what it entails. It starts with discussing the meaning of ethics, then it proceeds discussing about various ethical concepts. The text then examines various interpretations and schools of thoughts concerning of ethics, ethical values, and ethical relativity. The author further delves in the concept of ethical responsibility and finally discusses the relation of religion to ethics and explains the Shi'a point of view about this important subject.

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Translator's Introduction

The translation that the reader holds before him was accomplished as a dissertation for my Masters in Islamic Philosophy.

The Nature Of Research

Regarding the work itself I have chosen to translate the book freely and not literally since the audience for which it has been done would not be too familiar with the technical vocabulary used throughout the text. In places where it was not possible, I have transliterated the Arabic or Persian word and explained the meaning of it a footnote. This is because there are still many Islamic terms that do not have their English equivalents. It is my opinion that in such cases it is better to transliterate the term than to use some English word that only vaguely conveys the meaning intended.

As the reader will see, I have also critically examined the text in certain places, again in the footnotes. In still other places, I have explained the logical demonstrations underlying a theme that the author touches upon here and there. All in all, I would have to say that the book is good for those wanting to get acquainted with the way Islamic scholars in modern times have tried to tackle newer scholarly issues

that they are faced with using the Islamic ideological foundations.

Dedication And Thanks

I would like to thank all the people who helped this work come to fruition especially my parents and family. I would also like to dedicate this work to my Mother who is always supportive of me.

Shiraz Agha,

Founder, Hikmah Publications

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About The Author

Biography taken from the book *Philosophical Instructions*.

The author, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, was born in 1934 in Yazd, where he completed primary studies in the Islamic Sciences, and began reading the major classical texts in Islamic law and jurisprudence. In order to pursue advanced studies, he went to Najaf, but due to financial difficulties, he returned to Iran after one year and continued his studies in Qum. There, from 1952 to 1960, he participated in the classes taught by Imam Khomeini, while at the same time he studied the interpretation of the Qur'an, Ibn Sina's Shifa and Mulla Sadra's Asfar with Allamah Tabataba'i. He also spent approximately fifteen years as the student of Ayatullah Bahjat in fiqh. After his formal studies with Imam Khomeini were put to an end by the latter's exile, he spent some years engaged in discussions about the social significance of Islam, including discussions about Jihad, judicature and the Islamic government.

Around 1964 he cooperated with Shahid Dr. Behishti, Shahid Bahonar and Hujjat al Islam Rafsanjani in the resistance to the regime of the Pahlawi Shah and wrote two books, one called Bithat and the other Intiqam, the second of which he did the work of publishing himself. He also participated in the founding of a political organization of the clergy in Qum, that was primarily led by Ayatullah Rabbani Shirazi, and that included among its members Ayatullah Khamenei, Hujjat al Islam Rafsanjani and Shahid Quddusi. The founding documents of this organization were obtained by the regime and those whose names appeared on it were to be prosecuted, and so they went into hiding, including Ayatullah Misbah. When the atmosphere cooled down, he was able to return to Qum and resume his scholarly activities.

After that, he worked in the administration of Madrasah Haqqani along with Ayatullah Jannati, Shahid Behshti and Shahid Quddusi and for about ten years he taught philosophy and Quranic studies there. Then, shortly before and following the Islamic Revolution, with the support and encouragement of Imam Khomeini he participated in the founding of several schools and institutes, among the most important of

which was the Dar Rah Haqq institute, the Baqir al Ulum foundation and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute which he currently directs and where he taught the Asfar of Mulla Sadra. In 1996 he was elected to a five-year term as representative of Khuzistan province to the Majlis Khibrigan (Council of Experts).

Among the works authored by Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi, the following can be cited:

1. A Summary of Some Philosophical Discussions
2. A Sentry from the Ideological Trenches
3. Comparative Ideology
4. Philosophy Lessons
5. A Commentary on the Nihayah al Hikmah
6. Lessons in Philosophical Ethics
7. Principles of Doctrines
8. The Teachings of the Qur'an
9. Society and History from the Perspective of the Qur'an
10. Islamic Government and the Governance of the Jurist
11. Instructions in Doctrines
12. Ethics in the Qur'an
13. Translation and Commentary on the Book of Demonstration of the Shifa of Avicenna
14. Travelers on the Way of the Friend
15. Provisions for the Road
16. A Commentary on the Asfar of Mulla Sadra

Chapter 1: The Definition And Significance Of Ethics

A Lexical Definition Of 'Akhlaq'

Originally, the term 'akhlaq' is an Arabic word whose singular form is 'khalq'. Its lexical meaning is quality. This includes excellent qualities like courage and chivalry and appalling ones such as lowliness and cowardliness. Lexicographers usually deem this word to be a derivative of the same root as the Arabic 'khalq'. [However,] when it is said that so and so has a beautiful 'khalq' this implies that he or she possesses a beautiful quality of the soul or an immaterial condition that is brilliant. In contrast, when it is said that so and so has a beautiful 'khalq' then this means that he or she has an exquisite exterior and that their body is symmetrically stunning.¹

The Technical Meaning Of Ethics

In the parlance of the Islamic scholars and philosophers, the term ‘akhlaq’ has numerous nuances and usages some of which we will draw attention to here below:

Deep-Rooted Qualities Of The Soul

The [Arabic] word ‘akhlaq’ is mostly used amongst the Islamic scholars and philosophers to connote those features of the soul that are deeply rooted therein, are enduring and that make the person who possesses them perform certain actions that are in line with those qualities [almost automatically]. These actions stem from someone possessing such a deep-rooted quality without the need for him to deliberate and ponder over whether or not it is proper to perform such actions or not. Rather, they are almost mechanically accomplished by him. When defining ‘akhlaq’, the famous Sheikh Abu Ali al Miskaway says:

‘Akhlaq’ is a condition of the soul by means of which the human being who possesses it involuntarily moves towards performing those actions [that are in line with it] without the need to think twice [over the appropriateness of those actions].’²

Allamah Majlisi also says the following in his explanation of ‘Akhlaq’:

الخلق بالضم ملكة للنفس يصدر عنها الفعل بسهولة و منها ما تكون خلقية و منها ما تكون كسبية بالتفكر و المجاهدة و الممارسة و تمرين النفس عليها... كما أن البخيل يعطي أولاً بمشقة و مجادلة للنفس ثم يكرر ذلك حتى يصير خلقاً و عادة له

‘Akhlaq is a deeply-rooted quality of the soul that is the cause of certain actions [that are suitable to that quality]. These actions are thus performed effortlessly. Some of these qualities are natural and essential [for the soul] while some of them are acquired by means of [the repetition of] actions [that give rise to those qualities], or through [spiritual] struggle and by means of making the soul accustomed to performing those actions...for example, the stingy person will first strenuously give something of his away in charity. However, after repetition of the act, charity will become second-nature for him and he will become accustomed to it.’³

The late Fayz al Kashani defines ‘akhlaq’ in the following way:⁴

“Akhlaq’ is a quality that is firmly embedded within the soul. By means of this quality actions are performed with ease and without the need to deliberate over them [i.e. whether they are appropriate or not]. If this quality is such that beautiful actions that are acceptable to the faculty of reason stem from it then this will be named ‘good akhlaq’ while if repulsive and unacceptable actions stem from it then it will be ‘bad akhlaq’.”

In keeping with this definition, actions that are transient and not deeply-rooted within the soul (such as the anger of a tolerant person) or actions that are performed deliberately (such as the charity of a miserly person) will fall outside the scope of 'akhlaq' and ethical virtues. Correspondingly, 'akhlaq' will embrace both ethical virtues and vices. Therefore, one can speak of two kinds of ethical qualities: Virtues and Vices. This is something that some scholars have clearly stated.

Of course, there has been much debate over the source of these enduring qualities of the soul.⁵ Some are of the belief that they simply arise from the repetition of certain actions.⁶ Some others have surmised that they are brought into existence by heredity or the social atmosphere in which the person lives. A third group is of the opinion that they are essential and natural to man. This is while, none of these nuances are contained in the lexical root of the word 'khuḷq'. The quality of our soul can be formed by means of the repetition of certain acts, from heredity, through being affected by the environment around it or be natural⁷ and essential to it. In this regard, it is unconditional.

The Qualities Of The Soul

Sometimes, in the parlance of the scholars the meaning of ethics is any kind of quality of the soul that is the cause of good or bad actions. These qualities of the soul can be long-lasting and deeply-rooted within the soul or they can be ephemeral and superficial. It is also irrelevant [according to this meaning] whether or not these actions come about by means of thought or they are accomplished without any pre-meditation. Therefore, if a miserly person who is accustomed to being miserly should happen to sometimes give something away then based upon this meaning this quality of his will be called an ethical trait and from the point of view of the science of ethics it will possess a positive ethical value. Likewise, if someone, in a premeditative way, does some deed then his action will also possess an ethical value.

Ethical Virtues

Sometimes, also, the word 'ethics' is only used to refer to the good ethical virtues. For example, when it is said: 'Such an action is ethical,' or 'Lying is unethical' or when it is said: 'The essence of ethics is love' then in these cases the word ethics is being used to refer to the good ethical virtues. This meaning of ethics is also common in the English language. Usually the word 'ethical' is synonymous with 'proper' or 'good' while its antonym 'unethical' is used to refer to 'improper' and 'bad'.⁸

What are the principle ethical virtues? Do all of the ethical virtues return in the end to one or two virtues or not [i.e. do they branch out from certain principle virtues]? There is a great difference of opinion in this matter.⁹ According to the theory of Trait-Egoism the basis of all ethical virtues is that which is in the best interests of an individual. On the other hand, the theory of Trait-Utilitarianism states that the root of all good ethical qualities is desiring and acquiring that which is best for people in general [not just the individual agent of the action].

The Trait-Deontological Theory states that aside from mentioning personal interests and the common

good as a basis for ethical virtues one must also bring up obedience to God and justice [as being part of the foundation of ethical virtues]. Some others say that the root of all [ethical] virtues is two: The desire for good and justice. These individuals explicitly state that if an ethical state of the soul cannot be derived from the desire for good and justice then in this case the aforementioned state is 'either not an ethical virtue (such as faith, hope and wisdom that are religious or intellectual virtues) or it is not a virtue at all.' In the Christian tradition it is said that Christians possess seven ethical virtues: 'Three divine virtues: (faith, hope and love) and four human virtues: (considering what is in the best interest, patience, balance and justice).' Plato and the other Greek philosophers along with many of the Islamic sages mentioned four fundamental virtues: Wisdom, courage, balance and justice. [10](#)

The Ethical Organization Of Life

The word 'ethics' especially in the view of some western philosophers [11](#) has another usage. This can be seen when they speak of the 'Ethical Organization of Life'. Based upon this terminology, ethics stands alongside matters such as art, science, law, religion. At the same time, it is used in a different sense than them. According to this terminology, ethics, like language, religion and the nation existed before the individual and 'the individual enters into and to a large extent takes part in it'. It also exists after the person ceases to be. In other words, the existence of ethics does not depend upon the individual. Rather, it is 'a tool in the hands of the society as a whole that is used to guide and instruct the individuals and smaller segments of that society.'

A Code Of Conduct That Rules Over Individuals

Some understand 'ethics' to be a code of conduct of a group of people. Thus, the ethics of Nazis means the code of conduct that the Nazis accepted and the ethics of Christians will be the code of conduct that they acknowledged. [12](#)

Other meanings have been mentioned for the term 'ethics' that are very close to this term even though in these meanings some clauses have been added to make it more specific. For example, some have defined ethics as: A universal yet unofficial system that concerns itself with all sane human beings and seeks to control their behavior with others and is comprised of rules, expectations and ethical virtues and whose purpose is to lessen the wicked ethical qualities. [13](#) Others state: Ethics is a conglomeration of beliefs that are prevalent in society regarding the demeanor of its members and concerns itself with what conduct those members should adopt. [14](#)

The Science That Is Ethics

Many different definitions have been presented for the science of Ethics. Some of the great scholars have laid emphasis on the role of knowledge [in their definitions] and have defined Ethics as: The knowledge of the ethical virtues and vices. When defining Ethics al Tusi states:

‘It is the knowledge of the manner in which the human soul can acquire a trait by means of which all of the conditions and actions that intentionally stem from him can be characterized with beauty and praiseworthiness.’¹⁵

Also, a certain scholar in the West has defined [the science of] Ethics in the following way:

‘As can be deduced from the Latin and Greek root of the word ‘ethics’¹⁶ the science of Ethics is an awareness and knowledge of the habits, customs and qualities of human beings.’¹⁷

However, some others have underlined ethical action and conduct when defining Ethics:

‘The science of Ethics is a science that probes into the conduct of man from the point of view of how it should be...the science of Ethics focuses its attention on the way in which the actions of man can be perfect and good.’

In the following definition of Ethics: ‘The knowledge of how to live or the knowledge of how we must live’ more than anything else stress has been laid on the practical aspect of ethics not its theoretical one.

In order to present a more comprehensive and precise definition of the science of Ethics we can characterize it as the science that discusses the different kinds of good and bad qualities and the method by means of which one can acquire such good qualities and remove such bad qualities from one’s self. The topic of Ethics is thus good and bad qualities from the point of view of their relation with those actions of man that lie within his will and which he [freely] can acquire or keep away from. In the science of Ethics, aside from gaining an acquaintance with the different kinds of ethical virtues and vices, one is taught the ways in which one can acquire virtues and remove vices or prevent them from coming into existence. In the words of the late Naraqî:

‘The science of Ethics is the knowledge of those traits which have the ability to save or destroy man [spiritually]. It discusses the method by means of which one acquires the attributes that can rescue him from spiritual peril and the ways in which he can free himself from those qualities that devastate his soul.’

The Different Kinds Of Ethical Research

There are at least three different kinds of method of research in the field of Ethics. A proper understanding of these methods and their spheres of jurisdiction can assist us in gaining a better understanding the Philosophy of Ethics and its problems.

Descriptive Ethics

Descriptive Ethics is the study of and research into the description and explanation of the ethics of various individuals and societies. In other words, it is a report and description of the ethical principles that have been accepted by certain individuals, groups or religions. In this field of ethical research, the

method used is experimental and recourse is taken to the reports of others. Here there is no room for rational demonstrations and the likes of these. The goal of such a research project is simply to gain an understanding of the conduct and ethical demeanor of specific individuals or groups. Here we do not seek to persuade others to adopt or distance themselves from the ethical qualities that we report. Fundamentally, in such discussions there is no discourse into the propriety or impropriety of the ethical traits that have been reported. Such historical research is usually the pejorative of psychologists, anthropologists or historians.

Studies into the ethical qualities of Eskimos, the uncivilized tribes of Africa and Australia or the different religions of the world are fields of research that are related to Descriptive Ethics. Statements such as the following are examples of ones made in Descriptive Ethics: Eating the flesh of one's dead father is good in the eyes of Kalatines (a certain tribe in India).¹⁸ Killing old and decrepit people is acceptable in the opinion of Eskimos.¹⁹ Killing ones daughter was good in the eyes of the Arabs of the Age of Ignorance. Drinking alcohol is bad according to Islam

Substantive Ethics

Substantive Ethics²⁰ is a term that is use to refer to the discipline that probes into the principles, standards and methods by means of which one can distinguish between ethical beauty and ugliness, propriety and impropriety, and must and must not.²¹ This section of Ethical research is often called Command Ethics and seeks to examine the actions of human beings from the point of view of being attributed with being good or bad or obligatory or prohibited. It is irrelevant in this regard what view a specific individual, group or religion has regarding this matter. In other words, the topic of discussion in such ethical discussions is not a specific religion or group of people rather its topic is the actions of man that stem from his free will. It is for this reason that it is sometimes called First-Order Ethics. The method of research in such ethical discussions is rational demonstrations not experimentation or the report of others.

In general, we can say that two types of discussions regarding ethical statements are the pejorative of Substantive Ethics:

A. A philosophical defense of the general ethical values or laws such as: the goodness and necessity of justice and the evil and unlawfulness of injustice.

B. An effort to present a theory for the goodness and necessity of an action. For example, if, in an ethical system it is said that: 'Justice is good,' or 'One must be just,' in Substantive Ethics one discusses the rationale behind these general rules. One tries to answer questions such as the following: 'What is the reason that certain actions are correct?' 'How can we say that a particular action is proper?' 'Why is it necessary for someone to adopt a virtuous ethical conduct in his life?'²²

In an attempt to answer questions such as these, different theories have been put forth throughout the

history of ethical discourse. For example, some believe that the basis of the goodness of actions and their necessity is 'ethical egoism'. Others say that it is 'general utilitarianism'. Still others have presented the 'divine command theory' as an alternative to these. Finally, some have held that the basis of the goodness of an action is the fact that the aforementioned action will lead one to attain a perfection that is worthy of being acquired. In other words, these scholars have presented 'perfectionism' as the best standard for the goodness of those actions that lie within the domain of man's free-will.

Meta-Ethics

Meta-Ethics is a term that is used to refer to studies into and philosophical analysis of ethical statements. This section of ethical research is also referred to with the following epithets: Theoretical Ethics, Philosophical Ethics, the Logic of Ethics, Analytical Ethics and the Epistemology of Ethics.²³ This field in no way includes within itself experimental and historical studies into ethics. Also, it is not the responsibility of this branch of ethics to defend a particular substantive rule or value. In other words, its subject is not the ethics or conduct that has been accepted by a people or specific religion nor is it those actions of man that stem from his free-will.

Rather, the topic of this branch of ethical discourse is the statements and sentences that are utilized in Substantive Ethics. It is for this very reason that it has also been called 'Second-Order Ethics'.²⁴ Someone who discusses ethical statements from this point of view is completely neutral with regards to their truth or falsehood. For example, the two statements: 'Abortion is bad' and 'Abortion is good' are equal in his eyes. His principal responsibility in this section of ethics is to analyze the meaning of 'good' and 'bad' and to scrutinize the statement under question.²⁵

The most famous term that is used to refer to this branch of ethical studies is 'Meta-Ethics'. Some people claim that this term was coined for the very first time in the beginning of the twentieth century by the Neo-Positivists and some Marxist writers and was used in opposition to Substantive Ethics.²⁶ It is for this reason that we do not come across such a term in the writings of those philosopher that discussed ethics before them, even though we, here and there, come across discussions that lie within the jurisdiction of this branch of ethics.²⁷

However, we must ask, from what point of view does Meta-Ethics rationally and philosophically analyze ethical statements? In other words, what are the boundaries of the discussions of Meta-Ethics?

In Meta-Ethics ethical statements are analyzed from at least three points of view:

Semantics

In this section the meanings of the terms utilized in ethical statements are discussed. Usually, words such as 'good', 'bad', 'must' and 'must not' that are used as predicates in ethical statements are scrutinized and defined. The reason for this is that the subjects of ethical statements are usually clear.

For example, words such as 'abortion', 'telling the truth', 'lying', 'homicide' and the likes that are used as subjects in ethical statements do not need to be defined.

Of course, if the subject of an ethical statement is unclear then that will also be the focus of discussion. An example of this is the drawn-out discussions on the meanings of 'justice' and 'injustice'. Also, all of the concepts that are used in ethical statements as givens such as 'freedom', 'choice', 'desire' and 'purpose' or words that are used in the results that are derived from ethical rules such as 'satisfaction', 'felicity', 'perfection', 'success', and the likes of them are all examined and analyzed semantically.

Epistemological Questions

The following discussions can be considered to be some of the most serious discussions in the Philosophy of Ethics: Are ethical statements commands or do they seek to relate information about the external world? Are ethical rules relative or do they possess some absoluteness to them? What role does reason and demonstration play in ethics? These discussions are related to the epistemological dimension of ethical statements. Such discussions are delved into and hair-splittingly examined in meta-ethics.

Logical Questions

Can 'must' be derived from 'is'? Can ethical statements be derived from statements that are not so? Fundamentally, what is the relation between reality and value? What relation do specific ethical statements have with one another? These, and the likes of these, are some of the most important problems of meta-ethics and are related to the logical dimensions of the discussions surrounding ethical statements.

The Philosophy Of Ethics

After having gained an acquaintance with the different kinds of discourse in Ethics, the time has come to specify the jurisdiction of the Philosophy of Ethics. Does the Philosophy of Ethics include within itself every kind of ethical discourse? Does it include Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics and Ethical Analysis? Or is it solely relegated to the latter two branches of ethics? Is it just another name for Meta-Ethics?^{[28](#)}

Some of the Philosophers of Ethics believe that the Philosophy of Ethics includes, in some way, all three kinds of ethical research. In the words of one writer^{[29](#)}, the first responsibility of the Philosophy of Ethics is to present a universal theory of Normative Ethics. However, because it is impossible for someone to be fully satisfied with such a theory without first analyzing certain ethical matters the Philosophy of Ethics will include Meta-Ethics as well. On the other hand, because some psychological and anthropological theories have an effect upon the problems of Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics a certain experimental and descriptive analysis enters into the discussion. All of the works of the scholars of ethics before the

twentieth century were composed of Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics and some of the problems of Meta-Ethics. A casual glance at the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Butler, Kant, Mill and other scholars that discussed Ethics in the Islamic World will substantiate this claim.

Nevertheless, if the Philosophy of Ethics is truly a branch of Philosophy and a philosophical and rational analysis of ethical problems and rules in this case, we cannot state that it includes Descriptive Ethics. The reason for this is that there is no room in Descriptive Ethics for reason and philosophy. Rather, at the most it will include the problems of Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics. This is, in fact, the view of many of the Philosophers of Ethics.[30](#)

Of course, it should not be left unsaid that some intellectuals believe that delineating the jurisdiction of the Philosophy of Ethics and deciding whether or not it includes, aside from the problems of Meta-Ethics, those of Normative Ethics or not is itself one of the discussions of Meta-Ethics. To put it better, it is a result of a view that one adopts in Meta-Ethics and is related to the stance that one takes on the essence of ethical statements.[31](#) The reason for this is that if someone, like Ayer, takes up an scientific view regarding ethics statements and were to believe that they lack an epistemological dimension to them, then in this case they would simply be a way in which the speaker were to reveal his emotions or sensations to others in order to effect them.[32](#) In this case there would be no room for us to rationally and philosophically evaluate them. Accordingly, Normative Ethical statements lay outside the scope of philosophical discussions. On the other hand, if we assume that ethical statements possess epistemological value and seek to affirm or negate something regarding the world outside us then in this case the problems of Normative Ethics will also be a part of the Philosophy of Ethics.

Other philosophers of Ethics, especially analytical philosophers believe that the jurisdiction of the Philosophy of Ethics is limited to the discussions of Meta-Ethics. [33](#) From amongst the three main different discussions of Meta-Ethics (in other words, the discussions surrounding the meanings of terms used in ethical statements, the epistemological value of ethical statements and the logical relation between ethical statements and concepts) these individuals pay special attention to semantics. 'The reason for this is that they believe that philosophical problems can only be solved by a linguistic analysis and by clarifying the meaning of words.'[34](#) People such as R.M. Ayer hold such an opinion. These people exclude all psychological problems and experimental science and all of the questions that are posed in Normative Ethics from discussions surrounding what is good or correct.[35](#) Ayer has openly supported such a view and places special emphasis on the fact that the topic of the Philosophy of Ethics is solely the examination of ethical concepts and the correctness or incorrectness of their definition.[36](#)

It appears that the Philosophy of Ethics is simply another name for Meta-Ethics and Therefore, should not include the discussions of Descriptive or Normative Ethics. The reason for this is that the Philosophy of Ethics, in reality, examines and discusses the concepts and judgments that are taken as givens in the Science of Ethics and ethical statements. This means that it not only defines and clarifies the concepts and ideas of ethical statements but also occupies itself with problems upon which ethical judgments

depend. In other words, since the topic of the Philosophy of Ethics is the science of Ethics and the problems that are brought up in Normative Ethics we cannot consider the problems of Normative Ethics to be those of the Philosophy of Ethics as well.

In any case, by the Philosophy of Ethics we imply a science that clarifies the principles and foundations of the science of Ethics. Often, it may recount other matters such as the history of Ethics, its founder, its purpose, the method of research employed therein and also the transformations that it may have undergone throughout history. This is similar to the eight famous problems that ancient scholars mentioned in the beginning of their books and which were called the 'eight chief matters'. Sometimes the word 'science of' is added when they say 'the Philosophy of the Science of Ethics'. This implies that it is a branch of Philosophy that seeks to examine the foundations and philosophical underpinnings of the science that is Ethics.[37](#)

The Problems Of The Philosophy Of Ethics

After having been briefly acquainted with the jurisdiction of the Philosophy of Ethics we will recount some of the most important of its discussions so that we can grasp the discussions of this branch of learning with more clarity.

1. How do ethical concepts come into being? How does the human mind become familiar with them? How can we distinguish the ethical usages of terms such as 'correct', 'incorrect', 'good', 'bad', 'must', 'must not' and 'responsibility' from their non-ethical usages. How do we define the terminology and concepts that are related to ethical matters such as 'conscience', 'free-will', 'intention', 'responsibility' and 'intelligence?' Finally, what is the essence, meaning or usage of rules that are comprised of ethical jargon?
2. From what source do ethical statements and judgments come into existence? Do they have a source in Nature? Do they stem from reason? Or do they depend upon the commands and prohibitions of a society? Can we say that the basis of all ethical obligations is the will and law of God? Is it necessary to have a primary obligation from God in order to substantiate all other ethical duties?
3. It is possible to say that the most important topic that is discussed in the Philosophy of Ethics is the question of whether ethical statements are ones that aim at relating something about the outside world or statements that aim at creating something there. Even though ethical statements can be stated in two ways: in a declaratory way such as the following: 'Justice is good.' And also, in the form of a constructive statement: 'One must be just.' However, in any case this fundamental question must be answered: Are ethical statements principally declaratory or constructive?

What role does intention play in ethical actions? In statements such as: 'Telling the truth is good' is it only because when one tells the truth his words accord to reality that we can say that telling the truth is good? Or does the intention of the person who has spoken the truth also play a part in this relation? To

put it more precisely, is the foundation of an ethical judgment only the beauty or ugliness of the action or should one also take into consideration that of the agent of the act as well?

5. Is one of the conditions of an ethical rule the fact that it is obligatory? If this is so then how does this go with the free-will of man? Since, one of the basic conditions of an ethical action is that it stem from the free-will of an individual.

6. What is the relation between the ethical action and the reward that one accrues from it? Is it necessary to consider a good reward for a good action and a bad reward for a bad action? Or is there no relation between the ethical action and the reward or punishment that is a result of them. Assuming that a reward or punishment is taken into consideration for an ethical action is it necessary for the agent of the action to focus his attention on them when he is performing the action? Or is it that focusing on the rewards and punishments would be detrimental to the ethical nature of the action? Would it transform the action into something of a business transaction and therefore, annul it of its ethical value?

7. Another one of the most important problems of the Philosophy of Ethics is the question of what is the basis of ethical rules. On what foundation do ethical statements rest? How can we justify ethical obligations and values? What logic is behind the proofs presented for ethical values? Why must one speak the truth and why must one be just and not oppress anyone? Is the standard for the goodness and propriety of an action the joy that an individual feels when he performs it the way that the Egoists and Hedonists claim? Or is it the benefit and joy that the masses as a whole experience the way that Utilitarianism assumes? Can the commands and prohibitions of a society be the measure by means of which we weigh the goodness and or evil of an action the way that Durkheim believed? Or is the standard by means of which we assess the goodness and or evil of an action something that is not related to personal tastes or the inclinations of a society rather it rests in its relation with the absolute perfection and eternal felicity of man?

8. Can ethical rules be proven by means of rational demonstration or not? If so, are both the Basic and Derivative Judgments of Ethics capable of being proven through reason? Or are the fundamental laws of ethics something self-evident and not in need of being proven? The latter is what some Intuitivists and those who adhere to the theory of 'an ethical sense' believe. Also, fundamentally, what is it that makes a certain demonstration 'ethical'? In other words, what is the difference between ethical demonstrations and non-ethical ones? Also, the more important problem is what kind of proof would be an ethical proof? Is it a demonstration or is it dialectical in nature? Or is it one of the other types of argumentation? Or is it a special type of proof all its own (*sui generis*)?

9. Must every society have its own ethical system? Or do all human societies possess similar ethical rules? Do the ethical rules of a society or group remain stable throughout history or do they change in different time periods in relation to the advancement of society? For example, is the ethical system of a feudal society different from that of a bureaucratic one? In summary, is ethics something relative or is it absolute?

10. Another one of the important discussions that is presented in the Philosophy of Ethics is the examination of the connection that Ethics has with the other human sciences and wisdoms such as religion, law and the rules of a society. Is Ethics independent of religion or can no ethical system remain intact without religion? What is the relation between science and ethics? Can we derive ethical rules from scientific propositions or are these two fields completely separate from one another? Can we say that even with one thousand scientific facts one cannot prove or disprove an ethical rule? What relation do ethical rules have with the other social and political conventions? What do they have in common? What separates them from one another?

The Importance And Position Of The Philosophy Of Ethics

No one can doubt the importance of ethics, upbringing and the purification of the hearts of human beings. Having a good character, removing vices from one's self and beautifying one's soul with virtues is one of the most important factors in enjoying felicity in this world and the next. After belief in God and the Prophet ethics is one of the most important matters from the point of view of Islam. Being lackadaisical with regards to the purification of one's conduct may cause one to forfeit one's fundamental beliefs. The Holy Qur'an has clarified this for us and shown us that some bad habits and vices can hinder one from believing in God. The Holy Prophet said the following about the Christians of Najran: 'The reason that they did not accept Islam was not that they did not realize the truth of Islam rather it was their fondness for wine and the meat of pigs that prevented them from doing so.' From here we can comprehend the profound connection that exists between ethics and beliefs.³⁸ There have been many people who have been guided to the Truth through their good character and meritorious qualities. On the other hand, there have been many individuals for whom the road to a proper understanding of the realities of this Universe has been closed simply because of their bad conduct and evil character.³⁹

It is for this reason that from the point of view of Islam the science of Ethics and the problems that are related to ethical matters are one of the most important and noble of all wisdoms. Is it not true that one of the purposes of delegating the divine prophets was the purification of souls?

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

***'It is He who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them In Scripture and Wisdom,- although They had been, before, In Manifest error.'* (62: 2)**

In a famous tradition the Holy Prophet mentions that the purpose of his mission was to perfect the noble qualities of human beings and said:

بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ.

‘I have been sent to perfect the noble ethical qualities.’[40](#)

From the point of view of Islam, Ethics teaches us the proper way to live, a way that is acceptable to God. It instructs us on the suitable method of journeying to the final perfection that has been destined for man and the manner in which we are to establish a relationship with God. All of this is aside from the fact that it is one of the three basic pillars of the religious sciences alongside matters of belief and the rules of fiqh. It is for this very reason that the Islamic scholars, in the light of the Qur’anic wisdom, from times immemorial, have paid special attention to the problem of ethics. In Islamic societies, in every era and location there have always been compassionate masters and guides. These individuals have kept the science of Ethics alive through their spiritual struggles. Sometimes, aside from their practical asceticism they have written valuable and perennial works on Islamic Ethics. From amongst these, one can mention: ‘The Rasail Ikhwan as Safa wa Khullan al Wafa’[41](#), ‘as Saadah wal Isaad fis Sirat al Insaaniyah’, Tahzib al Akhlaq wa Tathir al A’raq’, ‘al Muraqibat fil A’mal as Sunnah’ and tens of other works.

Unfortunately, even though valuable and admirable efforts have been made in the field of Ethics, when we compare this with the progress of other Islamic sciences such as Theology and Fiqh, Ethics and the problems related to its philosophical underpinnings seem to pall in comparison. Not enough work has been done in this regard. Of course, there are many sociological, psychological and ideological reasons as to why Islamic scholars have not paid much attention to Ethics and, in the words of Ghazzali, the discussions on ethics have absolutely disappeared from the Islamic society and have been [completely] forgotten.[42](#)

فأما علم طريق الآخرة وما درج عليه السلف الصالح، مما سماه الله سبحانه في كتابه فقها و حكمة، و علما و ضياء و نورا. و هداية و رشدًا، فقد أصبح من بين الخلق مطويا، و صار نسيا منسيا

‘The path of the Afterlife, however, which the righteous ancients followed and which God has described in His book as being understanding, wisdom, knowledge, illumination, light, guidance and maturity, so verily this has become concealed amongst Creation and has been completely forgotten.’

To delve into them would make us stray from our main discussion.

In any case, this deficiency can be seen even more clearly in the matters that are related to the Philosophy of Ethics. In fact, even those scholars that wrote books regarding ethical matters and pondered over problems in this field were unfamiliar with such discussions. However, if we do not discuss the problems of the Philosophy of Ethics and do not adopt a suitable stance in this field then we will not be able to enter into the discussions of the science of Ethics. The reason for this is that discourse on the philosophical underpinnings of a science will naturally precede that science.

On the contrary, even though ethical virtues are not apparently prevalent amongst the people of Western countries, numerous books and papers have been written about Ethics and the Philosophy of Ethics in that part of the world. In fact, in their Universities the field of the Philosophy of Ethics has many adherents and is attractive to a number of students. Recently, vast amounts of studies and important ones at that have been conducted on these matters. However, they have not found much success in solving the problems of the Philosophy of Ethics. Much confusion can be found in these studies. The appearance of numerous Ethical schools of thought amongst them is also a sign that they still have not found a solid foundation upon which they might solve the problems of this branch of learning.

A History Of Ethical Discussions Amongst Muslim Thinkers

The Philosophy of Ethics is a new science. Not more than a century has elapsed since its establishment as an independent scientific field. Many are of this belief that the first signs of its appearance came with the publication of George Edward Moore's book, the Foundations of Ethics in the year 1903. Of course, there is no doubt that before Moore these discussions existed, scattered here and there, in Philosophical and Ethical books. Rather, it must be said that as far as historical evidence can tell us, one of the most important intellectual problems of philosophers throughout history was that of Ethics, ethical qualities and the problems related to these.

This was also true in the Islamic world. In other words, the Philosophy of Ethics was not an independent branch of learning alongside other ones. We do not know of even one book written by our previous scholars with this as its title. However, this should not be taken to mean that matters and discussions relating to the Philosophy of Ethics were not brought up in the other Islamic sciences and were not scattered here and there in philosophical and theological discussions. Quite the contrary, many of the most significant and fundamental problems of this science were brought up in the various philosophical, theological and usuli discussions of Muslim scholars. Valuable discussions on these topics were done which give us hope that we can present a legitimate Philosophy of Ethics based upon the doctrine of Islam.

By way of example, there is a famous problem that was always a subject of debate between the Ashairah and the other Islamic sects, especially the Mutazilah and the Shia. That was the problem of 'the Essentiality of Beauty and Evil' (*al-husn wa al-qubh adhati*). This discussion was conducted at great lengths in the Theological books and in recent times was also brought up in books on Usul, albeit by way of passing. Also, discussions on the human soul in the philosophical books, the scattered, yet profound discussions, on the practical and theoretical intellect, the discussions on the itibari concepts in philosophy and the science of usul, the problems of words and the disagreement of proofs in the science of usul and the topic of the generally accepted premises and ethical propositions that we find in the two disciplines of theology and usul are some of the most important problems that have a strong connection with the Philosophy of Ethics.

The stances of Muslim thinkers on these subjects can pave the way for us to find answers to the questions of the topic at hand. Evidently, one should always keep in mind the fact that the purpose for which these individuals brought up these discussions was something else and they were not deliberately attempting to unravel the mysteries of the Philosophy of Ethics. It is for this reason that we can see certain disorganization and incoherence in their words.

The Necessity For Discussions On The Philosophy Of Ethics

It is likely that some people may surmise that discussing the problems of the Philosophy of Ethics and philosophical and rational discussions on Ethics is a useless endeavor. This is especially so for us Muslims who believe in the infallibility of Revelation, our Prophet and the Holy Imams. Seeing as, once we have learned the correct way of life and the superior conduct that is acceptable to God from the Friends of God a pursuit of dry, rational and philosophical discussions cannot have a legitimate and cogent reason. Is not the purpose of life in the eyes of God for us to adopt virtues and to shun vices? If this is so, then what difficulty on this spiritual path to virtue can be solved by discussing the definitions of ethical concepts and hair-splittingly analyzing them? What help can the arguments for or against the ikhbari (declarative) or inshai (creative) nature of ethical propositions provide for us in this regard?

This reservation is, to a large extent, a legitimate one. We also accept the fact that our primary responsibility is to act upon the canons of Islam and the Quran and that the only way to achieve spiritual success and worldly and other-worldly felicity is to abide by the Islamic teachings. We believe that, even though, in the words of a famous poet, 'rational discussions may be as valuable as pearls and jewels', they are in themselves not enough to grant us spiritual felicity or cause the flowers of ethical virtues to blossom within us. However, the crux of the matter is that as followers of the Qur'anic ethics and adherents of the Islamic sciences we must be able to present the scientific and rational foundations of the ethics taught by the Qur'an in a logical and analytical manner to others and be capable of defending it from the objections of other ethical schools of thought. It is very clear that this cannot be accomplished without delving deeply into the discussions on the Philosophy of Ethics. Without a proper comprehension of the Islamic view on the problems of the Philosophy of Ethics how will it be possible for us to logically defend the ethical foundations and values of Islam from the other ethical systems of thought?

Of course, this is not something that is relegated solely for the Philosophy of Ethics. Rather, this is a responsibility that we hold with regards to other philosophical, theological, social, economic and psychological matters. For example, in relation to the problem of the Resurrection it is true that every Muslim believes that all human beings will one day be raised from the dead and then have their actions weighed. Nevertheless, if we wish to verify this matter for those who refute the Resurrection then we have choice but to resort to rational and philosophical demonstrations.

We cannot say to those individuals that deny the Resurrection and to non-Muslims that since God has stated in the Qur'an that there will be a Resurrection we must adhere to this belief. Correspondingly, in

order to explain the economic system of Islam and to prove its superiority over the other prevalent economic systems of the world we must take recourse to reason. In other words, when defending the laws of the Islamic economic structure from the attacks of its adversaries we have no choice but to take assistance from philosophical analysis and scientific methods of research. Even though every Muslim has accepted, in principle, the laws and rulings of Islam in the field of economics and endeavors to employ them in his life this does not resolve us of the need to discuss these matters in a disciplinary manner.

- [1.](#) Taj al-Urus, v. 6, p. 338; Lisan al-Arab, v. 4, p. 194 and al-Sihah, v. 4, p. 1471.
- [2.](#) Kimiyaye Sa'adah; Taharat al-A'araq, p. 58-57.
- [3.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, v. 67, ch 59, p. 372.
- [4.](#) Al Haqaiq, pg. 54; al-Mahajat al-Baydhah, 5, p. 95.
- [5.](#) Jami'a as-Sa'adat, v. 1, p. 21-26.
- [6.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, v. 67, ch. 59, p. 372. Some of the western philosophers of ethics have stated the following in their definition of ethical virtues: They are stable conditions or characteristics that are not completely essential [to the soul]. All of them must, to some extent, be acquired by means of education, practice or even through divine grace. (See: Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 140).
- [7.](#) An example of this is the love of a mother for her child and the inclination to nurture it.
- [8.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 28.
- [9.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, pg. 141 – 144.
- [10.](#) Al-Mizan, v. 1, p. 371-372.
- [11.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 27-30.
- [12.](#) Morality: A New Justification of the Moral Rules, p. 4.
- [13.](#) Morality: Its Nature and Justification, p. 8.
- [14.](#) An Introduction to the Philosophy of Ethics, p. 16.
- [15.](#) Akhlaq al-Nasiri, p. 14.
- [16.](#) In English the words ethics and morality are both used to refer to akhlaq. The word ethics is derived from the Greek root ethos which means character and the word morality is derived from the Latin root mores which also means conduct or tradition or habit. Refer to: Ethics and Morality in the Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 1, p. 329.
- [17.](#) Ethics, Pierre Jeanne, p. 53.
- [18.](#) The Elements of Moral Philosophy, p. 15.
- [19.](#) The Elements of Moral Philosophy, p. 16.
- [20.](#) On Normative Ethics.
- [21.](#) 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 121-122.
- [22.](#) Normative Ethics, Shelly Kagan, p. 1-11.
- [23.](#) 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 118.
- [24.](#) Philosophical Ethics, p. 9.
- [25.](#) 'Meta Ethics' in the Encyclopedia of Ethics, p. 790; A Dictionary of Ethics, p. 260.
- [26.](#) A Dictionary of Ethics, p. 260.
- [27.](#) Marifat, no 15, Nigarish Kulli bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 48.
- [28.](#) 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 118-121.
- [29.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 27.
- [30.](#) Marifat, no 15, Nigarish Kulli bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 48-50.
- [31.](#) Masalah Bayad wa Hast, p. 19-20, quoted in al Akhlaq wa al Aql, Adil Zahir, p. 24.
- [32.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, ch. 6.
- [33.](#) 'Meta Ethics', David Copp, in Encyclopedia of Ethics, p. 790-791.
- [34.](#) Masalah Bayad wa Hast, p. 19.

- [35.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 27.
- [36.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, p. 138–139.
- [37.](#) Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 69.
- [38.](#) Marifat, no 13, Akhlaq dar Qur'an, Misbah Yazdi, p. 17–18.
- [39.](#) Marifat, no 13, Akhlaq dar Qur'an, Misbah Yazdi, p. 18
- [40.](#) Bihar al-Anwar; v. 67, ch 59, tradition 18.
- [41.](#) The full name of the association was Ikhwan al-Safa wa Khullan al-Wafa wa Ahl al-adl wa abna al-Hamd (i.e., "The Brethren of Purity, the Faithful Friends, the Men of Justice and the Sons deserving praiseworthy Conduct"), a name which was suggested to them by the chapter of the "Ring-Necked Dove" in Kalimah wa Dimnah.
- [42.](#) Ihya al Ulum al Din, v. 1, p. 10, Introduction.

Chapter 2: Ethical Concepts 1 – General Discussions

Ethical Concepts

What kind of concepts are the concepts that are utilized in ethical statements? How do they come to be? How does the human mind become familiar with them? Are they concepts that depict the quiddity of beings or are they secondary concepts? Are they, like the concept of 'universality,' qualities of other mental concepts? Or are they, like 'causality,' attributes and distinctions of beings existing in the external world? Or do they have not relation with the external world whatsoever rather only serve to relate the emotions of the speaker? Or do they only transmit the way that he has understood something?

Three Types Of Universal Concepts

Before we answer the aforementioned questions, it is essential for us to inspect the different kinds of Universal Concepts and their distinctions so that we may accurately understand whether or not ethical concepts fit into one of these categories or are a class onto themselves.

We can divine the manifold kinds of Universal concepts into three main categories: 1. Quiddities. Such as 'man', 'whiteness', etc. 2. Logical concepts, such as 'universality' and 'peculiarity' 3. Philosophical concepts such as 'causality' and 'unity'. It is necessary to remind the reader that this threefold division is one of the breakthroughs of Muslim thinkers. A proper understanding of them has many benefits while, conversely, an inappropriate knowledge of them and their differences from one another can lead to irremediable mistakes. It is for this reason that we will now briefly explain each one of them.

Quiddity

Concepts that are quiddities or primary intelligibles are concepts that come into existence after knowledge of particular entities in that part of the mind in which ideas and concepts form. In other words, the human mind automatically abstracts them from specific instances. The moment that one or more particular or specific concepts are acquired by means of the senses or through internal intuition the faculty of reason abstracts a universal concept there from.

From one point of view this Universal concept comprises all of the common attributes of its particular instances and on the other hand it lacks their distinctions and particular qualities. It is for this reason that it can be predicated of an infinite number of individual instances. These concepts convey the essence and 'what-ness' of external things and transmit the boundaries of their beings. They are called quiddities or primary intelligibles and resemble molds of different shapes in which external beings can fit. It is for this reason that they can also be named 'mental moulds'. Many of the concepts that we employ in our day to day lives and the conversations that take place therein are of such a nature.

Examples of such concepts are 'human being', 'animal', 'plant' and the likes of these that are abstracted after having sensed one or more of their particular instances. Another example is the concept of 'whiteness' that is formed after seeing one or more white things. Also, the universal notion of 'fear' is acquired after having felt fear one or more times. Usually, they define these types of concepts as being those both the occurrence and attribution of which take place in the external world.

It is necessary to remind our readers that some of the ideas that fall under the category of quiddities do not have an instance that can be sensed. In other words, they have not been acquired through an abstraction applied to sensation rather they are taken from knowledge by presence. An example of this is the notion of 'soul' or concepts that are acquired from the knowledge we have of its faculties and states.¹ For this reason the famous statement: 'Nothing forms in the intellect except that it is first formed in the senses' can only be true if we take 'sensation' to mean any kind of particular and specific knowledge such that it would include intuitive wisdom as well.

Logical Concepts

Secondary Logical concepts are concepts 'the occurrence and attribution of which both occur in the mind.' In other words, they are not capable of being predicated of external beings rather only relate certain qualities of ideas and mental images. Since they do not seek to relate anything about beings in the external world they are not preceded by sensation. Rather, by meditating on mental concepts they are formed. These ideas come into existence in our minds in the following way: Once the mind has acquired quiddities it takes a look at them once again and then realizes that they have certain qualities. It is for this reason that the instances of such concepts and the subjects for which they are predicated are other concepts that only exist in the mind. For example, the instance of the concept 'universal' is the

‘concept man’ that only exists in the mind while the human being in the external world cannot be considered an instance of it. The reason for this is that the external human being always exists as an individual not a universal.

The distinction of logical concepts is that they are only predicated of ideas and mental forms. It is for this reason that with a little concentration they are acquired. All of the principal ideas utilized in the science of Logic are of such a nature; ideas such as: conception, affirmation, proposition, syllogism, universal, particular etc. Hence, these concepts are also called ‘secondary logical intelligibles.’

Philosophical Concepts

Philosophical concepts are concepts whose abstraction needs a certain amount of effort on the part of the minds and a comparison of things with one another. Usually, they tell us of the relations that beings share with one another, their states and the type of existence that they possess. Even though these concepts do not have an instance in the external world the beings therein are attributed with them. An example of such concepts are ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ that are abstracted by the reason after it has compared two things the existence of one of which depends upon the other and keeping this relation in mind. When it compares fire with the heat that comes into being from it and focuses on the dependence of the latter on the former the faculty of reason abstracts the concept of ‘cause’ from the fire and the concept of ‘effect’ from the heat.

If such an association and comparison not be at play concepts such as these can never come into being. For example, if fire is seen a thousand times and its heat is sensed for an equal number of times but no comparison is made between the two and or one does not concentrate on the fact that one of them comes into being from the other then the idea of cause and effect cannot be acquired from them. It is clear that the concept of cause and effect do not possess an external existence [separate from the existence of the subjects for which they are predicated]. This means that they do not have an external existence like ‘fire’ that is a substance or ‘heat’ that is an accident. The existence of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ are not such. All the while, the fire and heat are both attributed with such concepts. All philosophical concepts are such (like unity, multiplicity, contingency, necessity, potentiality and actuality).

The special distinction of such concepts, that are named secondary philosophical concepts, is that they are only acquired through comparisons and the analysis of reason and that they relate to us the manner of existence of certain beings and not the boundaries of their quiddities. Sometimes this distinction is remembered as such: Philosophical concepts do not have a separate instance in the external world; their occurrence is mental while their attribution is in the external world.

From the point of view that their occurrence is mental these concepts resemble logical concepts and from the point of view that their attribution is external they resemble concepts that are quiddities. It is for this very reason that they are sometimes confused with the first type of intelligibles and often with the second. Therefore, one must pay careful attention to the differences and distinctions of these three types

of intelligibles so that one may be safe from fallacies and mistakes that may arise from taking one of them for another.

As we previously stated, making out the logical concepts is much easier than the other types of universal intelligibles. With a little concentration one can fathom the fact that 'they do not refer to anything in the outside world rather they are only qualities of other mental concepts.' However distinguishing concepts that are quiddities from the philosophical concepts is not as easy. This is so to such an extent that even some of the greatest philosophers stumbled when attempting to discriminate them from one another. The main difference between these two types of concepts is that concepts that are quiddities show us the boundaries of the essence of beings while philosophical concepts tell us of the manner mode of their existence. The formation of these two groups of concepts depends upon two different mental exercises. The acquisition of quiddities in the mind does not require anything other than one or more particular sensation. This is while philosophical concepts, aside from the being conditioned with the aforementioned knowledge, need a special mental analysis. This analysis is usually accomplished by a comparison of two things that are known through knowledge by presence or two types of external beings.

After having become acquainted with the different types of concepts and each one of their distinctions, now the time has come for us to evaluate ethical concepts. In this section we must first clarify when can we consider a certain concept an ethical one? In other words, what is the sign that a certain concept is an ethical one? That is to say, what is the distinction of ethical concepts from other concepts? Secondly, what kind of concepts are ethical concepts? Can we say that they are one of the three kinds of universal concepts [that we have just stated above]?

The Subject In Ethical Statements

We have previously mentioned that ethical statements can be stated in two ways. They can be stated in a way that conveys the fact that they wish to tell us something of the external world. For example, we can say: 'Justice is good.' They can also be stated in the form of a command or prohibition such as: 'One must be just.' They are equally used in both forms. Therefore, the concepts that are utilized in ethical sentences can be divided into two groups:

1. Concepts that are used as subjects therein, such as: Justice, oppression, truth, falsehood, envy, spite, pride, chastity, abortion, keeping one's promise, etc.
2. Concepts that are used as predicates in such statements. For example: Good, bad, must, must not and the likes of these.

Now we wish to know what kind of concepts are the concepts that are used in ethical statements, whether those be the concepts that are used as the subjects of such statements or the ones that are used as predicates therein. How does the human mind become familiar with such ideas? Also, can we

categorize them under one of the three types of universal concepts or not?

In brief, it can be said that the concepts that are used as subjects in ethical statements are not quiddities and do not possess a separate external existence. Rather, they are abstracted from concepts that are quiddities. Following this, they are used in conventional (itibari) meanings according to man's social and personal needs. For example, since there is a need for us to control the desires of men and for them to respect others in their conduct, generally speaking, certain boundaries have been taken into consideration the exiting of which will be called 'oppression'. Observation of those boundaries and moving within them will be called 'justice'.

It must be examined from the point of view of Epistemology whether these ethical concepts are simply fashioned based on the desires of specific individuals or groups and have no connection with the realities in the external world and those beings which are independent from the wishes of individuals or groups? If this is so, then no kind of rational analysis can be made of them. Or, can we find some place for them amongst the realities of the external world and thus analyze them using the laws of cause and effect?

In this field, as well, many different views have been expressed. The truth of the matter is that, even though these concepts are made by men and are conventional (itibari) in a special meaning of this term that we will explain in detail later on, it is not true that they are completely disconnected from the truths outside our minds or that the laws of cause and effect do not apply to them. On the contrary, men make them based upon what he has distinguished he needs in order to attain his felicity and perfection. This discernment, like in other cases similar to it, sometimes accords with reality and other times does not. For example, it is possible that someone may form such concepts only so that he may attain his personal interests and thereafter may impose them upon society.

In any case, we cannot say that these conventions are unsubstantiated and lacking a foundation [in reality]. The fact that we can discuss them and weigh their soundness and or incorrectness is one of the best proofs in this regard. We affirm some of them and reject others and for each one of them we search for a proof to substantiate it. If these conventions (itibarat) were simple a manifestation of personal inclinations and resembled personal tastes of individuals (like tastes in color, clothes or types of food) then they would not be deserving of praise or scorn. In this case, accepting one and rejecting another would not mean anything other than an expression of similar or dissimilar tastes.

In any case, even though the existence of such concepts depends upon the conventions of men, the existential relations between human actions and the results that accrue from them are the foundations of these conventions (itibarat) and innovations.² In other words, the concepts that are used as subjects in ethical statements are neither quiddities (such that they would display the essence and what-ness of external beings) nor can they be considered as logical concepts that are the attributes of mental concepts. Rather they are of the class of philosophical concepts (mafahim e falsafi). For example, as we have seen, in the statement: 'Justice is good,' 'justice' that is the subject of this ethical rule is not a

quiddity that exists in the external world. It does not possess an independent reality in the external world. Rather it is an abstract concept that can only be derived when we take a number of things into consideration [and then compare them with one another]. The quiddity of the act itself does not play any role in the abstraction of this concept. Justice can be the speech of someone or an act which someone performs. Slapping an innocent person is an act of oppression but can be an instance of justice if it is performed as an act of retribution. The act of slapping however, that is a real being in the external world, is neither just nor oppression. In order to abstract these concepts one must take other things into consideration.

Of course, some may surmise that sometimes an external being is attributed with ethical goodness or evil. For example, in the statement: 'Walking in a land that belongs to someone else is an act of oppression.' Some may say that walking is an act that exists in the external world and here it has become the subject in an ethical statement. However, when careful attention is paid, we come to realize that walking is itself not the real subject of this ethical rule. Rather, since this act of walking was done in the land of someone else and is an instance of stealing it has become the subject of this ethical law. Therefore, even in these cases, the external being has become the subject of an ethical ruling because it is an instance of an abstract concept (stealing).

The Predicates Of Ethical Statements

The chief discussion about ethical concepts is related to those concepts that are used as predicates in ethical statements. One of the perennial preoccupations of philosophers of ethics was to present a defensible theory regarding those concepts that convey ethical values (such as good and bad) and those that relate ethical obligations (such as must and must not). This is so even today. It is necessary for us to first properly analyze ethical concepts before we enter the discussion regarding the ikhbari or inshai nature of ethical statements. It is for this reason that when we adopt a reasonable and justifiable standpoint about the source of these concepts' genesis, their proper definition and as a result the significance or meaninglessness of ethical statements then the road to presenting a correct and justifiable view with regards the ikhbari or inshai nature of ethical statements will have been found. In this section we will attempt to recount some of the most important theories about the definability of ethical concepts and the source of their genesis and, with the will of God, in the following chapters we will present our own view on this subject. Deliberation on the explanation we will present about our own view will itself clarify the deficiencies and flaws of the rest of the perspectives.

Viewpoints On The Definition Of Ethical Concepts

In general, it is possible to say that there are three main views amongst philosophers of ethics and especially western thinkers on this subject: Definist theories, Non-Naturalistic theories and Non-Cognitivist theories.

Definist Theories

The common trait of this group of theories (that includes a wide range of ethical standpoints) is the belief that it is possible to [independently] define and analyze ethical concepts. Every ethical concept can be defined without taking recourse to other ethical concepts and simply based upon non-ethical ideas.³ Principally, the advocates of this view hold that ethical concepts and terms are simply symbols and signs for the distinctions and peculiarities of external beings. Based upon this stance, 'it is possible for one to define must on the basis of is and value based upon reality.'⁴ This group of theories can be divided in another universal division into two groups: Ethical Naturalism and Metaphysical Theories.

A. Ethical Naturalism

This group is of the opinion that ethical concepts can be defined by referring to natural and physical concepts. These people believe that ethical rules are statements that explain natural phenomenon but there [verbal] form has changed.⁵ According to this collection of views we can evaluate ethical judgments with the help of scientific experimentation in the same way that we justify scientific statements and concepts (that seek to relate information about physical reality) using experimental research. Ethical Naturalists have a difference of opinion with regards to what kind of natural concepts should be used to help define ethical concepts. It is for this reason that ethical naturalism can itself be divided into at least three sub-groups:

1. Biological Theories: This view holds that biological concepts can be used to define ethical concepts.
2. Sociological Theories: This group uses sociological concepts in the definition of ethical concepts.
3. Psychological Theories: This group takes recourse to psychological concepts to explain and analyze ethical concepts.

B. Metaphysical Theories

The adherents of this school of thought strive to use philosophical, theological and divine concepts in their analysis and definition of ethical concepts. In reality, according to these theories ethical rules are statements that seek to explain metaphysical or theological realities but their form has changed. In order to substantiate ethical rules and concepts one can take recourse to the very method of research that is used in order to prove metaphysical statements.⁶ For example, the famous 'Divine Command Theory' can be considered one of the Metaphysical Theories that considers the content of ethical concepts to be the commands and prohibitions of God. In the view of these individuals 'must' means 'something that is commanded by God'. Therefore, the statement: 'One must act justly,' means exactly what the following statement wishes to convey: 'Justice has been commanded by God.'

Intuitionism/ Non-Naturalistic Theories

Intuitionists accept the belief of Definists who say: 'Ethical terms are signs and indications of the distinctions of things such as being desired or guides to felicity.' At the same time they deny the fact that qualities that are stated using words such as 'good' or 'bad' can be defined on the basis of non-ethical terminology.⁷ Butler, Cheswick, Rishdal, Moore, Prichard, Rice, Crit, Hartman and Jung can all be considered Intuitionists.⁸ With all of their differences that the individual members of this group has with one another⁹ they are all unanimous upon the fact that some ethical concepts are self-evident, intuitively known, incapable of being defined and simple in nature. At least one ethical concept should possess these traits so that it can be used as a standard by means of which we can fathom the other ethical concepts. Based upon this view, it is only through intuition that we can understand ethical rules and concepts. They cannot be known through scientific experimentation or through meta-physical demonstration.¹⁰ It is for this very reason that this group is called 'Intuitionists'.

In other words, in the opinion of Intuitionists ethical concepts can be divided into two distinct groups: Basic concepts and Derivative ones. The distinction of Basic concepts is the fact that they are known through intuition, are simple, and incapable of being defined. As a result, the propositions that are comprised of these concepts will not need to be proven. In the parlance of such individuals, they 'justify themselves'.¹¹ Derivative concepts are ones that are not intuitive, are simple and must be defined based upon the Basic concepts. Of course, there is a difference of opinion with regards to what concepts are Basic and which are Derivative. For example, Moore considers the concept 'good' to be the basic ethical concept. Seiwick believes that the concept 'must' possesses the qualities of a basic ethical concept. Rice stresses that both 'good' and 'must' are basic ethical concepts. Some others have presented the two concepts of 'good' and 'correct' as being the basic ethical concepts.

Non-Cognitive Theories

With all of the vast differences of opinion that they have with regards to ethical concepts and propositions¹² all of the adherents of this school of thought agree that ethical concepts are meaningless and incapable of being defined. Neither can they be defined using natural or metaphysical concepts (as the Definists believe) nor can they be defined using basic ethical concepts (such as the Intuitionists hold). These individuals do not believe that ethical concepts have a knowable dimension to them and hold that such concepts do not relate to us anything about the external world.¹³ The Emotivism of Ayer (1910–1989) and Stevens (1908–1979) and the Advocationism of Ayer (1919) can be considered to be types of Non-Cognitivism. As can be deduced from their name these individuals say that ethical concepts are simply concepts that describe our feelings, emotions or our personal opinions not ones that describe the reality outside us.

Ayer emphatically states that when we say: 'Telling the truth is good' it is as if we have said: 'Hooray for telling the truth!' Or when we say: 'Stealing is bad' this means: 'Stealing, boo!'¹⁴ In other words,

concepts such as 'good' and 'bad' do not give us any information about the external world.

In the words of Ayer:

'The way that emotive signs are written and used and which usually come after such statements are tell us that the fact that this act has not been ethically avowed is an emotion that has been stated as an expression of the external world. It is evident that here nothing has been said that can be affirmed or negated and by my saying this kind of statement I have not related something about reality. I have not even stated something about the condition of my mind. I have only expressed some ethical emotions that I may have.'¹⁵

In any case, according to Non-Cognitivism terms such as: 'good', 'correct' and 'must' express our emotions, at least when they possess ethical nuances. However, they do not relate the fact we have such emotions.¹⁶

The Source Of The Genesis Of Ethical Concepts

After having become acquainted with some of the most important views regarding ethical concepts it is only fitting that we close this chapter with an explanation of some of the views regarding the cause that brings ethical concepts into existence.

External Reality

According to this view, ethical concepts are external realities that are comprehended by the intellect or through intuition. This means that the instances (masadiq) of ethical concepts are a portion of the external and real world. The goodness in an ethical deed is exactly like the beauty that exists in a sensible object. The beauty of a flower is a reality that the intellect of man discovers and understands. In some of man's actions there is this type of beauty. Some actions possess a special beauty and this beauty is something real. In other words, this beauty possesses reality regardless of whether or not the intellect grasps it or not. The responsibility of the intelligence is simply to discover that beauty.

Of course, one must pay heed to the fact that much discussion has been carried out in aesthetics regarding the beauty of sensible things. Is this beauty something that possesses an objective existence in the external world or is it something that is relative to the mind of the observer; such that minus the observer there would be no beauty or ugliness in things? Many Positivists believe that terms such as 'beauty' and 'ugliness' are used in the same way that ethical terms are used. In other words, they are not used to relate something regarding the external world. Rather, these words are used to express the emotions of the speaker or to induce a specific reaction in the listener.¹⁷ Aside from this, even if we accept that beauty is something real in sensible things it is not as easy to accept such beauty in the actions of men. The truth of the matter is that even if we suppose that beauty is something real it will only be acceptable in sensible or imaginary things. In abstract things it will not exist, rather in abstract

and intelligible concepts beauty is a convention of the intellect. Of course, here by 'abstraction' or 'convention' we intend something specific that we will explain later on.

In any case, if someone were to surmise that ethical beauty, ugliness, goodness and evil are real things that are discovered by the mind then as regards the problem of the ikhbari (declarative) or inshai (conventional) nature of ethical propositions he will easily be able to accept their ikhbari nature. This is so because, in this case, ethical propositions will have the capability to be true (be in accordance with reality) or false (not be in accord with reality).

Insha' And Itibar

Another group of philosophers of ethics, that comprise a wide range of individuals, are of the opinion that, contrary to what the previous group believed, the source of ethical concepts is the itibar or convention. This implies that ethical concepts have no basis in reality rather are simply the conventions that are caused by the whims of the speaker. They resemble questions or commands that do not relate anything regarding the external world. In the same way that the sentence, 'Go outside,' does not relate to us anything other than the wish of the speaker [for such an action] ethical statements do so as well. In other words, they do not mean to tell us something about external reality even though they may show us, indirectly, the existence of certain inclinations and emotions inside the speaker.

Amongst the famous adherents of this view one can recount the school of thought of Society-ism, the supporters of the Divine Command Theory and also the Ash'airah in the Islamic world. Of course, the adherents of Society-ism hold that the source of the genesis of ethical concepts is the intellect and conscience of society as a whole¹⁸ while the Ash'airah and those who believe in the Divine Command Theory say that the commands and prohibitions of God are what cause ethical concepts to come into existence. According to the Ash'airah 'good' is that which God has commanded while 'bad' is what God has prohibited.¹⁹ Therefore, if there was no God or if there was a God but He did not order or prohibit anything then we would not be able to understand what is good, bad, right, wrong, responsibility and the likes of these concepts. In no way could we grasp whether or not oppression is bad or good or whether returning a trust is acceptable or not.

According to this view the science of ethics is not a science the responsibility of which is to unveil reality for us. Rather, it is simply a collection of commands and prohibitions. This is contrary to disciplines that seek to describe things that exist in the external world and whose subject matter is things that exist in the outside world. These things possess reality regardless of whether or not man comprehends them. The responsibility of man is simply to discover them.

God willing, in the following discussions we will elaborately criticize the inshai nature of ethical statements and will speak about the Ash'airah, Socialists and other adherents of this school of thought. However, it is fitting to recall one point here: There is no doubt that some ethical propositions possess an apparently conventional (inshai) nature. Doubtless, the apparent connotation of sentences such as

the following: 'Act justly,' 'Tell the truth,' 'Do not lie,' and sentences of the sort are duty and obligation. However, taking into consideration the fact that ethics is something related to those acts of man which stem from his free-will and that the relation of man's actions with the effects and results that accrue from them is a real and objective one, we can conclude that the insha' and convention of ethical propositions can be formed on the basis of those real relations. With this explanation all ethical rules can be reverted to declaratory propositions and thus ethics will be a descriptive science.

Human Nature

The third viewpoint regarding the source of the genesis of ethical concepts is that such concepts are natural to man and that the knowledge of them has been placed within his essence. The comprehension of ethical concepts is one of the distinctions of man's existence.²⁰ Human beings have been created in the ethical form of God. This means that 'our ethical intuitions, that are the basis of our existence, are involuntarily a depiction of the basic ethical opinions of God.' In other words, at least some of the ethical principles that are accepted by human beings are not capable of being taught. 'Being creatures of God, we come into this world with these principles.'²¹ Based on this view if God were to have created us in another way, we would have understood them differently. Meaning that it is possible that the things that we currently understand to be good we might understand to be bad or vice versa. Or, it is even possible that God might have created us in such a way that we would not understand what is good and bad at all.

This view has a profound connection with one of the important matters of Epistemology whose solution plays a role in the resolution of the current dilemma. That Epistemological problem is whether or not human beings possess some amount of innate knowledge or not. When man is born does he possess some natural concepts within his mind or does he not understand anything at all when he is born?

Plato²² believed that when man comes into this world, he knows everything. The reason for this is that the soul of man exists in the World of [Platonic] Forms before it is born. This is a world in which the [universal] realities of beings exist. Man becomes acquainted with all of these realities in this supernatural world. However, the descent of man into the temporal realm and its connection with the body is a veil that stands between him and his innate wisdom such that in order to recall that wisdom it is necessary for him to be reminded of what he already knows (not be taught something that he does not know). It is for this very reason that he considered the true purpose of education to be the reminding and recollection of that natural wisdom. Education serves to remove the mundane veil from the face of the innate wisdom that is essential to man. Plato held that using the internal and external senses as well as faculties of knowledge does not grant man any new knowledge.

Rene Descartes also believed in certain innate knowledge, albeit in a different way. He divided the concepts that man conceives into three distinct categories²³: 1. Accidental and external concepts that are acquired through the external senses. For example, color, light, taste, heat and sound are all such concepts. 2. Concepts that are invented and fashioned by the mind of man and its faculty of imagination;

for example, a Pegasus or mermaids. 3. Natural concepts or ideas that are concepts that God has placed within the intelligence of man and which neither experimentation nor sense perception can conceive of. Examples of such concepts are God, time the soul and physical dimension. Amongst these three types of concepts Descartes only believed that Essential concepts possess epistemological value.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) also affirmed, in another way, natural and a-priori concepts.²⁴ He relates a certain group of concepts to the mind that he names 'a-priori'. He considers the concepts of 'time' and 'space' to be related to the level of sense and the twelve categories to be related to the level of understanding of the mind. He held that the comprehension of these concepts is an essential and natural feature of the mind.²⁵

In contrast to this group (that can be considered in some way rational philosophers), another group²⁶, that are called Experimentalist Philosophers, believe that the mind of man has been created like a blank tablet that does not possess any picture in it at the beginning of its genesis. It is only by coming into contact with external beings through our senses that that their reflections and pictures form on that tablet of our mind and it is transformed into a colorful easel full of pictures.²⁷

Epicure (270 – 341) considered sense perception to be the basis and foundation of all types of knowledge. The Epicureans believed that 'the intellect, by means of which we evaluate and judge our sense perception, is itself completely dependent upon the senses. Thus, if senses make mistakes then the intellect, is totally defective and flawed.'²⁸ These individuals understand the standard of truth to be sense perception and 'believe that there is nothing in the intellect except that it first existed in the senses.' John Locke²⁹ (1633 – 1704), was extremely opposed to the idea of innate concepts, especially with regards to ethical concepts. He understood the proofs of the adherents of such a view to be inconclusive. In response to the question, 'From where does the intellect acquire the materials for the edifice of its comprehension,' he responded by saying, 'I answer this question in one word: All of our knowledge rests on the foundation of sense perception and in the end, all understanding springs from experimentation.'³⁰

When criticizing the theory of those who adhere to innate conceptions it is necessary to remember two points: The first is that it is not acceptable to hold that the intellect of man was imbedded with certain specific concepts from the onset of its existence. This includes concepts that are related to material beings, those that are related to immaterial beings and those that are related to both. Every conscience individual can, by introspection, comprehend that he does not possess such concepts within himself. We cannot even find one individual that intuitively grasps such essential and natural concepts before he begins using his senses and prior to attaining the stage where his mind has achieved a certain maturity. In the words of Avicenna:

فكيف يكون عندنا علم و كنا لا نفطن له حتى استكملنا؟ و ليس يجوز أن يكون عندنا علم برهاني لا نعلمه، فكيف علم أصح من البرهان؟ و إن كنا نعلم ثم نسينا، متى كنا نعلم و في أي وقت نسينا؟ و ليس يجوز أن نعلمها و نحن

أطفال و ننساها بعد الاستكمال ثم نتذكرها بعد مدة أخرى عند الاستكمال.

‘How is it possible for us to have knowledge but be unaware of it until we achieve intellectual maturity? It is not permissible that there was demonstrate-able knowledge with us that we were unaware of; what to say of knowledge that is more correct than demonstration. If we knew [something] and then forgot it [after we were born] then when did we possess such knowledge? When did we forget? It is not possible that we knew when we were babies and then we forgot after we had grown a bit and then remembered after we had grown up more.’³¹

Secondly, even if we assume that a series of concepts are ingrained in the nature of man, we cannot concomitantly prove from this their objectiveness. At the most it can be said that such and such a concept is natural to the intelligence of man. Of course, in every case there is always the possibility that if man’s mind was created differently then he would have comprehended that matter in a different way. This belief leads to many unacceptable corollaries that have been discussed in their own proper place. It does not seem likely that the adherents of such a view would accept such consequences.

The truth is that at the onset of his birth man does not possess any sort of concepts or ideas within himself. Rather, conceptual knowledge gradually comes into being with the help of the effort of the intellect. When man achieves intellectual maturity then his faculty of reason abstracts such concepts in different ways. He acquires them through scrutiny and analysis. The Holy Qur’an says the following in this regard:

وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَرَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

***It is He who brought you forth from the wombs of your when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and that ye may give thanks (to Allah..)* (16: 78).**³²

In our opinion even self-evident propositions do not exist from the onset of man’s existence. In other words, when it is first born the newborn does not comprehend proposition such as the following: ‘the whole is greater than its parts,’ ‘It is impossible for two contradictory statements to be true at the same time,’ and the likes of these. When it still has not conceived concepts such as ‘whole,’ ‘part,’ ‘bigger than,’ ‘smaller than,’ ‘contradiction,’ ‘being true at the same time’ and ‘impossibility’ then how is it possible for it to affirm propositions that are composed of these concepts? All such concepts are secondary intelligible concepts that are acquired from external beings through the effort of the intelligence. This means that the child can only grasp such propositions when he not only has the ability to comprehend those concepts and also the capability to compare them with one another.³³

It should not be left unsaid that most Islamic philosophers do not accept the fact that [certain] concepts are natural to man and that they precede sense perception and experimentation. Therefore, it is possible to say that in the view of the Islamic philosophers, ethical concepts are not ones that have been

embedded within the nature of man. Of course, as we will explain in detail later this in no way implies that they are in any way relative or that they lack an intellectual source.

In the end it is only fitting that we point to some of the sayings of Muslim philosophers in this matter:

Avicenna (370 – 428): In numerous places of the Shifa he explicitly states that the soul of man does not have any natural or essential knowledge unless and until he uses his internal and external senses.

The first things that we encounter and we recognize are the objects of sense and the forms that exist in our imagination which are taken originally from our sense perception. After this we capture the universal intelligible concepts from these.[34](#)

Khwajah Nasir ud Din Tusi (597 – 672): Even though sense cannot in itself give us a universal opinion, it should however be known that the key to the door to all universal and particular knowledge is sense perception. Since, the human soul, from the beginning of its creation until it has acquired all of the first intelligibles and acquired knowledge, obtains the sources of its conceptions and affirmations through the senses and it is for this reason that the First Master said:

من فقد حساً فقد علماً

If someone lacks a sense, he thus will lack a [type of] knowledge [that stems from that].[35](#)

Fakr al Razi (544 – 604): In his commentary on the 78th verse of the blessed Surah Nahl he explicitly states that the soul of man is empty of all conception at the onset of its creation. This includes concepts that are self-evident and those that are not. He also considers this matter to be, in itself, self evident and necessary. This is because all of us clearly comprehend that when we were embryos in the wombs of our mothers or when we were children none of us had any understanding of propositions such as, 'Negation and affirmation cannot be true at the same time,' or 'the whole is greater than its parts.' Therefore, he considers all concepts and affirmations, both self-evident and not, to be preceded by internal and external sense perception.[36](#) Also, in his book al Mabahith al Mashriqiyah[37](#) in the chapter titled 'On the fact that the comprehension of the soul with respect to another is not essential to it not is it something necessary,' and also in the chapter titled, 'On the fact that instruction is not a recollection,' he goes to great lengths to criticize and scrutinize the opinions of Plato and his disciples who adhere the natural knowledge of the soul.

Mulla Sadra (979 – 1050) has also criticized the theory of natural concepts in two chapters of his famous book the al Hikmah al Mutaliyah that are titled with the same headings as the two chapters of al Mabahith al Mashriqiyah that were mentioned above.[38](#)

[1.](#) Comparative Ideology, p. 90, p. 132–134.

[2.](#) Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 182–183.

- [3.](#) 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 127.
- [4.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 205.
- [5.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 206–207.
- [6.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 208.
- [7.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 215.
- [8.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 215.
- [9.](#) 'Ethics. Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 128.
- [10.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 216.
- [11.](#) 'Moral Reasoning' in Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 852–853.
- [12.](#) 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 129.
- [13.](#) Moral Vision, p. 8–10.
- [14.](#) In the book 'Moral Vision' he states: This theory has taken the name of 'the Boo–Hurrah theory'.
- [15.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, p. 146.
- [16.](#) Dar Amadi bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 140–141.
- [17.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah, Mantiq, p. 157.
- [18.](#) Falsafah wa Jameah Shinasi, p. 78, 115.
- [19.](#) Al Mahsul fi Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 123; al Tahsil min al Mahsul, v. 1, p. 180; Dirasat Aqliyyah wa Ruhiyyah fi Falsafah al Islamiyyah, p. 257–258; al Iqtisad fi al Itiqad, p. 187–197.
- [20.](#) 'Ethics, History of', in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 83, 95; 'History of Western Ethics: 2, Classical Greek', in Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 1, p. 465–466.
- [21.](#) Reason and Religious Belief, p. 441.
- [22.](#) The History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 1, p. 178–192; al Hikmah al Muta'aliyyah, v. 3, p. 487–488; Ideology Tatbiqi, p. 97–98.
- [23.](#) Ta'amulat dar falsafah Ula, p. 41; Tarikh Falsafah Garb, v. 2, p. 781; Ideology Tatbiqi, p. 99
- [24.](#) Sharhi bar Tamhidat Kant, v. 1, p. 42–51; Tarikh Falsafah, Copelston, v. 6, p. 233–236, 251–178; Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 199; Ideology Tatbiqi, p. 100–103.
- [25.](#) The History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 6, p. 265.
- [26.](#) Ideology Tatbiqi, p. 104–115.
- [27.](#) Amuzish Falsafah, p. 198; Ideology Tatbiqi, p. 104–107, Ilm Huzuri, p. 159–162.
- [28.](#) The History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 1, p. 462–463.
- [29.](#) Ideology tatbiqi, p. 105–107.
- [30.](#) The History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 5, p. 88–93.
- [31.](#) Al Shifa, Burhan, p. 320.
- [32.](#) It is necessary to remind our readers that this verse is not in conflict with the knowledge by presence [that human beings have] of God which has been pointed out by verses such as the 172nd verse of the Surah Araf. See: al Mizan, v. 12, p. 312; Ma'arif Qur'an, p. 396–397.
- [33.](#) Fitrat, Shahid Mutahhari, p. 47–53.
- [34.](#) Al Shifa, Burhan, p. 106–107.
- [35.](#) Asas al Iqtibas, ch. 8, p. 375.
- [36.](#) Al Tafsir al Kabir, v. 20, p. 72.
- [37.](#) Al Mabath al Mashriqiyyah, v. 1, p. 496–498.
- [38.](#) Al Hikmah al Muta'aliyyah, v. 3, p. 487–492.

Chapter 3: Ethical Concepts 2 – Must And Must Not

In the previous chapter, we mentioned some general points regarding the predicates of ethical propositions and explained some theories regarding the definability and source of ethical concepts. It is only fitting that we now separately examine both those concepts that convey ethical values and those that serve as commands in ethical propositions. The reason for this is that the ideas that serve as predicates in ethical propositions can be divided into these two groups and manifold opinions have been expressed with regards each of them.

In Islamic philosophy many different meanings have been mentioned for ‘necessity and obligation’ the understanding and delineation of which is very important for our current discussion. It is for this reason that we will now explain, as an introduction, the different types of ‘necessity’. It is necessary to remember that since we can easily understand the concept ‘must not’ once we have understood ‘must’ we will concentrate our discussion on the explanation and definition of the concept ‘must.’

The Different Types Of Necessity

The relation between the subject and the predicate in a proposition such as, ‘a is b’ can be conditioned in three different ways: necessity, possibility and impossibility. The relation of necessity is inevitable, unavoidable and inescapable. In other words, when there is a relation of necessity between the subject and predicate of a proposition this implies that the intellect cannot accept that it is not so. For example, in the proposition, ‘The number four is an even number,’ the relation between the number four and being an even number is one of necessity and one that cannot be denied by the intellect.

This relation of ‘necessity’ can itself be divided into three distinct categories: ‘essential necessity,’ ‘necessity by means of something else’ and ‘necessity in relation to something else.’ Of course, possibility and impossibility also have different types and categories that do not need to be explained. Therefore, we will now briefly explain each of the three kinds of necessity. [1](#)

Essential Necessity

From the logical point of view the meaning of Essential Necessity (adh dharurat adh dhati) is that not only is the predicate necessary for the subject but this necessity stems from the essence of the subject itself. In other words, the essence of the subject is such that demands such a predicate and it is thus impossible for that predicate to be separated from that subject. In the parlance of the philosophers, the meaning of Essential Necessity is that when we relate existence to something this predicate is necessary for it. In other words, it is not possible for us to consider them separated from one another. If

such a being were to exist in the world (and in fact it does exist) this is the same being that we name 'the Essentially Necessary Being' and which, based upon the proofs for the Unity of God, and cannot be more than one.

Necessity By Means Of Another

All of the possible beings that have come into existence can be named 'Necessary by Means of Another'. The 'possible being' is one that does not essentially demand existence and non-existence. Now, if it were to come into being this is a sign that another being has caused it to do so. In other words, since its complete cause has come into existence it has acquired, in turn, the necessity of existence. Therefore, its necessity is one that has been acquired from another.

If we take two pans of a scale into consideration, if they both are empty from any sort of weight, then it is necessary for them to remain in this state of equilibrium. It is possible for both pans of this scale to move up or down. Of course, if we place a weight in one pan then it is natural that it will come down and with this weight upon it, it will be necessary for it to do so. Therefore, every essentially possible being acquires necessity from its cause. Such a necessity is called 'Necessity by Means of another'.

Necessity In Relation To Another

Just as it is clear from the name of such a necessity, it rests upon a comparison between two things. In Necessity by Means of another it is said that, for example, when we take into consideration the existence of 'a' then the existence of 'b' is also necessary. Here, we only imply that if 'a' exists then it is impossible that 'b' not exist. But we do not seek to imply that this necessity of existence stems from 'a' or does not. Of course, since Necessity in Relation to Another is something general it comprises within itself all of the instances of Necessity by Means of Another. To such an extent that the relation of a cause and its effect is one of the best instances of Necessity in Relation to Another even though it is also an example of Necessity by Means of Another. Of course, the dimensions of the way in which these two concepts apply to this case are different. In Necessity in Relation to Another we are not concerned with the fact of whether or not the necessity of 'b' has stemmed from 'a' or not. Rather, our sole concern is to convey the fact that when we take 'a' into consideration then the existence of 'b' (or vice versa) is necessary. In conclusion, every cause, both complete and incomplete, have a Necessity in Relation to their effect² and two effects of the same cause also have a Necessity in Relation to themselves.

The Concept Of Must In Ethics

There are numerous opinions with regards to the concept of the 'ethically must'. In the previous chapter, while we were explaining the views regarding the definition of ethical concepts, we gained an acquaintance with some of them. There we indicated that many of the philosophers of ethics believe that the concept 'must' is one that can be defined with the help of scientific, natural, biological, social,

psychological, philosophical or theological concepts. On the other hand, another group of philosophers have special views, especially regarding the concept of 'must' which we will now allude to.

The Existence Of The Most Possible Good

G.E.. Moore, an English philosopher believes that the concept 'must' means 'to be correct'.³ 'Correct' in turn is a concept that can be defined using the concept 'good'. 'In every instance where the agent must perform a certain act the correctness of that act can be defined in the following way: It is an act that in reality creates the most 'good' possible under the circumstances.'⁴ Therefore, in his view the meaning of 'must' is that this act creates the most amount of goodness possible. For example, the statement: 'I must help my neighbor,' means: 'Helping my neighbor will lead to goodness.'⁵

Needless Of A Definition

H. I. Picard (1871 – 1947) believes that the concept 'must' is self-evident, intuitive, not in need of being defined and in fact something that cannot be defined. He explicitly states that we must pay attention to the self-evident nature of our obligations, in other words, the intuitive nature of our knowledge of them. 'And in general, if we were doubtful of whether or not we had an obligation towards the creation of 'a' under circumstances 'b' then the solution of this problem does not rest in the deliberation of universal concepts rather it lies in directly being present in an instance of the circumstances 'b' and then intuitively fathoming the obligation of creating 'a' in such circumstances.'⁶ In the view of Picard, obligation is a unique and inimitable concept and Therefore, it is not possible for us to define it based upon other concepts.⁷

Command And Decree

Rudolph Carnap (1891 – 1970) holds that all ethical concepts, including the concept 'must' in reality means command and decree. In his opinion the statement: 'One must not steal' is a misleading one that in reality means: 'Do not steal.' 'One must act justly' in reality means: 'Act justly.'⁸

A Means Of Expressing One's Emotions

Ayer also clearly states that 'must' and 'must not' in ethics, and in general all ethical concepts as well, do not possess any concrete meaning and do not relate to us something regarding the external world or mental state of the speaker. Rather, they simply display his emotions. In other words, they are merely signs and symbols that are utilized to articulate our feelings.⁹

Necessity By Means Of Another

Some Muslim scholars deem that the concept of 'must' in ethics conveys the same meaning as does the

philosophical concepts Essential Necessity or Necessity by Means of Another. One of the experts in this field states: 'The technical meaning of must is the same as that of Essential Necessity or Necessity by Means of Another that conveys that intensity or importance of a being.'¹⁰ Of course, the difference between the ethical 'must' and the 'must' used elsewhere is that the former is used with relation to those things whose existence depends upon the free-will of an intelligent agent while the 'must' that is used elsewhere is used in relation to those things whose necessity is acquired from causes that do not possess free-will. In other words, the only difference between ethical necessity and logical necessity is that the necessity of ethical beings stems from the free-will and reason of the agent that performs them while the necessity of beings that are not ethical in nature stems from factors not one of which is the free-will of a rational agent.¹¹

Careful consideration of the view of the conventional nature of ethical concepts shows us that the concept 'must' in this theory is taken from Necessity by Means of Another.¹²

However, as we will explain in detail when we expound on our own personal view regarding this subject, ethical necessity is in reality an instance of Necessity in Relation to Another, not Necessity from Another. The incorrectness of the aforementioned view will become clear by means of matters that will be stated there.

A Clarification Of The Preferred View

Words such as 'must' and 'must not' are used in two ways. Sometimes, in certain languages, they are used as commands and prohibitions. In this case they play the same role as prepositions do. In this case, they do not have an independent meaning [that can be grasped separately from the statement in which they are used]. Rather, along with the verb that is used in the statement with them, they take the place of the form of a command or prohibition. For example, the statement: 'You must say' is used in place of 'Say' and the sentence: 'You must not say' is used in place of 'Do not say.' Sometimes they possess an independent meaning which is 'necessary.' For example, in place of the statement: 'One must act justly' one can use the following statement: 'Acting justly is necessary.' In other words, 'must' does not mean command or decree here rather it signifies necessity and conveys to us the necessity of the act.

Without a doubt, in the first usage 'must' and 'must not' have a conventional and constructive nature and do in fact convey the feelings and emotions of the speaker. It is quite possible that they were made without taking into consideration the consequences of the acts which they were made with reference to. It is also likely that they were made without any goal or purpose in mind. Of course, one must keep in mind the fact that a command and convention can only be reasonable when, first of all, the person making them has a reasonable purpose in mind and, secondly, the command that he makes or law that he forms really is useful in fulfilling that purpose. In other words, his command must have a foundation in reality and must have been formed based upon real and justifiable standards.

In conclusion, the concepts 'must' and 'must not' can often be simply used to convey the emotions and personal tastes of the speaker. This is when they are used in place of decrees as a substitute for commands and prohibitions. Also, though this is true, they are only justifiable and reasonable when they are formed based upon the factual necessary relation between the act commanded and its results.

The second meaning the concept 'must' (i.e. when they are used to convey the necessity and obligation of the performance or foregoing of a certain act) is used in numerous types of propositions and in different disciplines. For example, they may be utilized in statements made in the natural sciences or mathematics. An instance of this is when a teacher tells his students in a laboratory: 'One must combine Chlorine and Sodium in order for salt to come into existence.' Or for example, a doctor may tell his patient: 'In order to regain your health you must consume this medicine.' Now, the question is whether the meaning of 'must' in the aforementioned statements (in other words, in statements made in the Natural Sciences or in Mathematics) are simply conventional and are commands and decrees issued by the speaker or that they seek to convey a factual relation between beings?

There can be no doubt in the fact that in the first case the statement seeks to convey the fact that there is a real relationship between the composition of the two elements and the coming into existence of the chemical material [we seek to produce by the composition in question]. In the second case the same relation is stated existed between consuming the medicine and regaining one's health. In the parlance of the philosophers in such cases the term 'must' seeks to convey the 'Necessity in Relation' that exists between the cause and its effect. It shows us that until a specific act (the cause) is not accomplished its consequence (the effect) will not come into existence. This means that it expresses the necessity of performing or foregoing a certain act in relation to a specific purpose. This is what, in the parlance of philosophy, is meant by 'Necessity in Relation to Another.'

However, when such words are used in ethical and legal propositions (in their declaratory form) do they also seek to communicate the necessity that an act has in relation to the goal that it seeks to produce or do they merely convey a conventional and man-made relation between them? It is here that different have been expressed such as the ones that we have seen until now. Some have surmised that the concept 'must' when used in statements that express the laws of Nature relate to us something real in the external world and their incorrectness or incorrectness (i.e. the truth or falsehood) is something that can be easily understood. On the other hand, when 'must' is used in ethical statements it is simply conventional and thus one cannot in any way test whether or not they are true or false and whether or not they accord to external reality or not.

But the truth of the matter is that the real meaning of ethical necessity is the very causal relationship [that, as they say, is expressed in scientific statements]. This is the causal relation that exists between an act that stems from the free will of the agent and the ethical or legal goal [that is its purported consequent]. For example, when a jurist states: 'A criminal must be punished,' even though he does not clearly state the goal behind such a law in reality he seeks to convey the casual relation that exists

between punishment and the goal of lawmaking (i.e. safety in society). In the same way, when a teacher of Ethics says: 'One must return what one has been trusted with to its owner,' in reality he seeks to say that there is a relation between this action and the goal of ethics, that is for example the attainment of perfection and felicity. It is for this reason that if one was to ask the lawmaker: 'Why must we punish the criminal?' he will answer: 'Since, if we do not punish him society will fall into chaos.' Also, if we were to ask the teacher of Ethics: 'Why must we return what we have been entrusted with to its owner?' he will answer us based upon standards that he has adopted in the Philosophy of Ethics.

In the beginning of this chapter, we stated that one of the extensions of necessity in relation to another is the reciprocal relation between cause and effect. When the complete cause of a being exists, the effect must also necessarily exist. Conversely, whenever the effect exists its cause must also exist. Now, we must pay attention to the fact that the relation of causality can sometimes exist between two real beings in the external world like fire and its heat that are necessary with respect to one another. It is also possible that such a relation exists between an action that stems from the free-will of an agent and the consequences of such an action. It is abundantly clear that the action of man can have, from the point of view that it is a particular phenomenon, effects within the soul of man and also external to him. It can also have specific social and personal repercussions. Of course, such effects may be recognizable and capable of being grasped by everyone and at other times they may be unrecognizable. In any case, when we compare the actions of man that stem from his free-will with the consequences and effects that stem from them we see that they are each necessary in relation to one another.

For example, if the purpose of man is to attain the proximity to God and he wishes to actually attain such a lofty goal and on the other hand we have understood from some source (such as reason or the Divine Law) that this goal cannot be attained except by the performance of some specific actions then in this case it will be said that there is a necessary relationship that exists between that goal and those actions. This necessity can be expressed in the form of an ethical statement in which the aforementioned action will be connected to 'must.' For example, we may say: 'In order for that effect (the nearness to God) to come into existence one must perform that special action.' Or for example: 'One must tell the truth.' The meaning of such a statement is that there is a necessary relationship that exists between telling the truth and the proximity to God (that is the perfection of man). This is exactly how we stated in the experimental sciences that for example: 'In order for water to come into existence hydrogen and oxygen must combine together in a specific way.'

In conclusion, 'must' has two usages: One is declaratory and seeks to relate something regarding the external world while the other is simply man-made and conventional. The first implies a Necessity in Relation to Another and express a real connection between those actions of man that stem from his free will and his ethical pursuits. In the second usage of this term, although 'must' and 'must not' are conventional and man-made they are not altogether without a basis in reality. Rather, there is a truth and reality hidden behind them and these concepts seek to convey such a truth. As we have indicated, these types of ethical concepts are, much like the concepts that are used as subjects in ethical

propositions, are philosophical concepts and are secondary intelligible concepts. Such concepts, although they do not have an extension in the real world they are derived and abstracted from real beings that do exist in the external world. If, on occasion, other nuances are imbued within them or they are intended to mean something else then this would be an allegorical or metaphorical usage of such concepts.

The Difference Between Necessity In Value And Non-Value

Now, the following question can be raised: If the meaning of 'must' is the same no matter where it is used then what is the difference between the problems and propositions of those disciplines that deal with ethical values and the problems of the natural sciences or mathematics that also contain concepts such as 'must'?

The basic difference lies within specific clauses that are taken into consideration in each case not in the meaning and significance of 'must' and 'must not'. In order to explain: In natural and mathematical concepts nothing other than the philosophical necessity in relation to another nothing else is taken into consideration and no other clause is attached to the concept in question. On the other hand, when concepts such as 'must' and 'must not' are used in matters of law or in ethics then they are done so along with a clause. Here it is the necessity that is understood between the deeds of man and the consequences that accrue from them. In other words, 'must' in ethics and the law is used in a much more confined way [than the way it is used in for example the natural sciences]. In ethics it is used to signify the casual relation between deeds of man and the consequences that they lead to. Aside from this there is no difference between their meaning when they are used to ethics, the natural sciences and mathematics.

The Difference Between 'Must' When Used In Ethics And When Used In Law

Since a legal ruling, like an ethical ruling expresses the real relation between an action and a certain goal we may now ask the question: What is the difference between ethical rulings and legal ones? What causes one problem to be legal in nature while another one is ethical?

The problem of the relation of ethics to law and also the difference that separates these two disciplines is one of the most important topics of theoretical ethics. There can be no doubt in the fact that these two groups of problems and in general these two fields of study have many similarities with one another. They both play a similar social role and express standards by means of which social conduct may be organized. The manner of expression and apparent form of legal and ethical rulings are also the same. With the exception of a few instances, they both deal with the deeds of man. It is for this reason that there is no consensus of opinion amongst scholars as to the way in which these two disciplines differ from one another. Everyone has sought to differentiate them based upon their own personal views on

ethical and legal problems.

In the view of many scholars of the West the fundamental difference between ethics and law is the manner of their execution. Legal rulings are guaranteed by the law to be executed. There is a physical entity outside the members of society that guarantees their execution. This is in contrast to ethical laws that are not guaranteed to be executed by any physical power or threat. Rather, at the most, there is the promise of being praised or the threat of being scolded and things of this nature that are verbal signs of appreciation or scorn [that pave the way for their execution]. [13](#)

In other words, it is an internal force that guarantees the execution of ethical laws. For example, the sentiment of doing good to others or the inclination to perform an action that is correct. In other words, in the opinion of such individuals the most important difference between these two disciplines lies within the method by means of which they each attempt to organize the conduct of people. Law uses legal organizations such as the Congress or the Supreme Court to control the actions of individuals while ethics utilizes the powerful force of tradition, popular beliefs and personal opinions. [14](#)

Others hold that the difference between law and ethics is the source of their formation. They state that, for example, the laws of a state are formed by its congress and are put into execution by its supreme court, while the rulings of ethics is not something that can be formed by any law-making body or be implemented by a court and fundamentally they cannot be made. It is only natural that the holders of such a view have not been able to accurately depict the difference between law and ethics in primitive societies that lacked distinct branches of government. [15](#)

In our opinion, even though ethical and legal problems differ from one another from many points of view [16](#) the fundamental difference between them lies in their goals and the actions that are purported to secure such goals. [17](#) The goal of the law is to create social order. Of course, this is an order that stems from the deeds of man. In every era, lawmakers formed laws in order to create order in society and in order that society may be better able to attain its goals. They formed these laws according to their own knowledge and based upon the demands of their respective eras and places. For example, in order that automobile accidents may be reduced to a minimum, the lives of human beings may be safe and thus a relative amount of social order may come into existence, they say that: 'All vehicles must move on the right side of the road.' This is while moving on the right side of the road does not have any special significance in and of itself. Even if everyone moved on the left side of the road the goal for which the first law was formed would be secured (just as it is so in some countries in this world). In any case, lawmakers take into consideration things that they feel will prevent social chaos and transgressions from ensuing and will secure social order. From the causal relation that exists between these they abstract a legal 'must' and then say for example: 'All vehicles must move on the right side of the road.'

As is abundantly clear, in order to secure the goal of a legal ruling it is not necessary for the agent of the act to perform it with a specific intention. In other words, from the point of view of the law, it is not important with what intention individuals obey the social laws. Thus, if a person were to perform legal

obligations with the intention of showing off to others and draw their attention towards him the goal for which the law was formed would still be secured. He must move on the right side of the road and must not break the law with whatever intention he does so. He may do so because he fears punishment or he may do so in respect of the law and the rights of others. He may even do so in order to seek the proximity of God.

However, the goal of ethical rulings is to help man attain his real perfection and his eternal felicity. Such a goal is unattainable with the intention of the free agent of the act. Of course, all people do not hold the same opinion as to the goal of ethics. Even the philosophers of ethics hold different opinions regarding the goal of ethical rulings. Briefly, some consider moral ideals to be the goal of ethics and that in order to achieve such ideals specific actions must be performed with a specific intention in mind, even though many of the ethical schools of thought of the West have not mentioned the problem of intention. In conclusion, the fundamental difference between law and ethics is in the type of goal that they respectively pursue. The goal of law is simply the acquisition of the needs of society and it is for this reason that they can be secured even through force. On the other hand, in ethics a goal is pursued that cannot be acquired without the intention of the agent being present.

In the end, it is useful to recall one point. That is that it is possible that a legal system may exist within an ethical one. [For example,] everything that exists within the legal system of Islam can also be found within the jurisdiction of Islamic Ethics. In the parlance of fiqh, the rules of the law are such *wajibat at tawassuli* (obligations the correctness of which do not entail the performers making an intention to draw near to God thereby) the correctness of which do not depend upon the intention of the agent. At the same time all such *tawassuli* obligations can be performed with the intent to gain proximity to God and thus as acts of worship.

Another point is that even though the formation of laws and rights are generally related to those of man's actions that he performs by his free-will, in a few instances they can also relate to other things. For example, if while he is sleeping someone should happen to hurt another being this action will not fall within the sphere of ethics since ethics does not pass judgment with regards to those of man's actions that he does not perform freely. At the same time, it falls within in the jurisdiction of the law and such a person is legally obligated to recompense the person who he may have hurt when he was sleeping. Or for example, if someone may happen to kill someone else in his sleep he must, according to the law, pay the blood money for such an act but there is not ethical ruling to be made about him. Of course, when he wants to pay the blood money if he should do so with the intention of gaining proximity to God then has from this point of view performed an ethically praiseworthy action.

[1.](#) Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 42–51; Taliqah ala Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 71–85; Sharh Mabsut Manzumah, v. 3, p. 61–80.

[2.](#) Philosophical Instructions, v. 2, p. 56.

[3.](#) Moral Obligation, p. 145.

[4.](#) Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 10–11.

[5.](#) Moral Obligation, p. 145–146.

[6.](#) Moral Obligation, p. 17; Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 14.

- [7.](#) Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 14.
- [8.](#) Philosophy and Logical Syntax, p. 24.
- [9.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, p. 146.
- [10.](#) Kawishhayeh Aql Amali, p. 102.
- [11.](#) Kawishhayeh Aql Amali, p. 103.
- [12.](#) Taliqah ala Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 390–391.
- [13.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 31–32.
- [14.](#) A Dictionary of Ethics, (Morality and Law), p. 279–280.
- [15.](#) Dar Amadi bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 17.
- [16.](#) Huquq wa Siyasah dar Qur'an, v. 1, p. 22–24.
- [17.](#) Taliqah ala Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 393, no 382.

Chapter 4: Ethical Concepts 3 – Good And Bad

We previously stated that the concepts that are employed as predicates in ethical statements can be divided into two universal categories: obligations and values. In the previous chapter we discussed in detail concepts that serve as obligations (must and must not). Now we intend to examine value concepts. Of course, since the basis of all value concepts are the concepts 'good' and 'bad' and all other ones such as 'correct', 'incorrect', 'proper' and 'improper' are either synonymous with 'good' and 'bad' or somehow return to these two we will Therefore, suffice ourselves with an evaluation of these two value concepts.

In this chapter we will attempt to discover of what nature is the concept of 'good'. Is it a mental construct or does it have an extension in the external world? Is it real or is it man-made and conventional? Is it a quiddity or is it one of the philosophical concepts? What is good? What kinds of things are attributed with goodness? Is goodness simply a quality of ethical actions or does it also include non-ethical things and individuals? How can we distinguish the ethical usage of this term from its non-ethical one? What is the cause of ethical goodness and evil? Does it have a root in personal inclinations and tastes? Or is it connected to the commands and prohibitions of society? Or does it find its source in the commands and prohibitions of God? Or should we search for its source in the existential connections that lie between the actions of man and his ultimate perfection?

Unfruitful Attempts To Analyze The Concepts 'Good' And 'Bad'

Some have wished to answer the aforementioned questions using a linguist analysis of concepts such as 'good and bad', 'beauty and ugliness' and 'good and evil' and other synonymous concepts. For example, they have said that the word 'khayr', that is synonymous with the Persian word 'khub', is from the same root as 'ikhtiyar':

الخير ما يختاره الانسان

‘Goodness is that which man chooses [freely].’

‘Good’ is the thing that man chooses and adopts on his own. In other words, the goodness of things and actions depends upon the choice and will of man. In the words of Barouche Spinoza (1632 – 1677), we do not desire that we understand as good rather conversely, we name that thing as ‘good’ which we desire. As a result, we name everything that we abhor as ‘bad’.¹

In another place he says:

We do not strive to attain that thing which we consider to be good. Rather, conversely, since we strive to attain something and we seek it out we consider it to be good.²

Many Muslim philosophers and lexicographers have said the following in their definition of ‘khayr’:

الخير ما يتشوقه كل شئ

‘Good is that which all things desire [or long for]³’

or:

الخير ما يرغب فيه الكل

Good is that which all things like.⁴

That thing is good which everybody and everything desires.⁵ In some of the works of Aristotle (322 – 384) this definition of goodness has been mentioned. In his Nichomacean Ethics⁶ he states that those who have said that the good is that towards which everything inclines have spoken the truth.⁷

Regarding the genesis of the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ some of our great scholars⁸ have stated that it is possible that the word ‘husn’ beauty was used for the very first time for physical beauty. Man saw that other individuals of his species possessed a symmetrical and harmonious body, especially in their face; they felt within themselves an inclination and natural pull towards them. In this situation they used the word ‘beauty’ or ‘husn’ beauty to describe such a state. In other words, if they felt pleasure in seeing someone then they attributed them with beauty while if they felt agitated by seeing someone then they attributed them with ugliness. In the second stage they used these concepts to describe actions, meanings and other ideas that were in line with their social way of life. In other words, they used them to describe things that were helpful in their attaining their felicity as human beings and their enjoyment of life on earth. For example, justice, helpfulness, telling the truth and trustworthiness are all attributed with goodness since they are things that are in line with the felicity of man and help him better enjoy his

social life. In contrast, things such as oppression, encroaching upon the rights of others, lying and treachery are things that are attributed with being evil.

Leaving aside from the correctness or incorrectness of such views, the reality of the matter is that such grammatical and linguistic discussions, that do not go past being possible explanations regarding the genesis of the words 'good' and 'bad', are not suitable answers to rational and philosophical problems regarding the reality of such concepts. The reason for this is that in opposition to such views, it can easily be claimed that man chooses, inclines towards and takes pleasure in that thing which he deems to be good, and not vice versa. This means that man selects that thing and takes pleasure in the thing which he has previously accepted as being good.

What is more, even if we assume that in linguistic discussions we reach the conclusion that the individuals that coined a certain language first took into consideration the word 'ikhtiyar' (choice) and then based upon it coined the word 'khayr' (good) or that they coined the word 'khub' (good) first off for physical beauty and only thereafter generalized it to include spiritual and ethical beauty, in any case this will not help us in solving rational and philosophical questions in any substantial way. Such questions will remain, as they were, unresolved.

The Concepts Of Physical Beauty And Ugliness

In order to properly understand the different views regarding ethical goodness and evil it is fitting that we first point out some of the most important views of the scholars of aesthetics on the subject of physical beauty and ugliness. What does beauty and ugliness mean when we say: 'This flower is beautiful,' or 'This is an ugly landscape.' Is ugliness and beauty a subjective or objective concept here? Do they depend upon the observer? In other words, are they something real or are they mental constructs? If they are in fact real things then a more precise philosophical question arises regarding them: Are they quiddities or are they philosophical concepts? Generally speaking, we can say that there are three main views regarding beauty which we will point out here below.

Beauty Possesses An External Existence

Some have held that beauty is something that exists in the external world and have understood it to be a quiddity amongst others.⁹ In other words, these individuals believe that there is a quality that exists in the external world named beauty just as color, shape, dimension and the likes of these exist in the external world. Even though we do not have a faculty that can sense beauty, our intellect uses the faculty of sight to come to the conclusion that there is another real quality named beauty in this flower, for example, aside from its color, shape and dimensions.¹⁰ This is exactly the same way that all philosophers believe in the existence of substance. They say that even though we do not possess an independent faculty of sense perception that can perceive substance, the intellect uses the other senses to gather that there is something in the external world upon which rest the other accidental

qualities of a body and which serves to support them¹¹.

Therefore, even though we cannot directly perceive beauty it nevertheless possesses an extension in the external world. Our mind can fathom it from the external world without any sort of intellectual abstraction. Of course, it must be remembered that the sentences that are usually used to express this external quality are usually misleading. For example, we say: 'The painting of that artist is beautiful.' The reason for this is that from such statements we usually understand that that artist created beauty in a place where it did not exist. In reality, however, the artist simply removed a curtain that stood in the way of beauty and allowed it to display itself. In other words, in the same way that a thinker does not have the ability to create something in the external world rather he only discovers it, the artist also does not create beauty rather only discover it.¹²

Beauty Is A Philosophical Concept

Some aestheticians have adopted a second view¹³ regarding beauty. That is that beauty is a philosophical concept. In other words, they believe that the concept of beauty, like the concept of causality is acquired through a certain amount of mental abstraction and often through comparison [of certain concrete realities]. In the view of such individuals, even though beings in the external world are attributed with beauty it is not a concept like color, shape and dimension such that it would possess a real extension in the external world. In terms that we have previously used, it only mentally occurs [for its subject] but its subject is attributed with it externally.¹⁴ Herbert Reid says:

Man reacts to the shape, plane and dimensions of things that surround his senses. Sometimes he takes pleasure in the ornamentation of these shapes, planes and dimensions and the absence of such ornamentation causes him to get upset and revile. The sense that ascertains these relations that man takes pleasure in is the sense that perceives beauty. In opposition to this lies that sense that perceives ugliness.¹⁵

A Sentiment And Emotion

A third group, that comprises a large amount of aestheticians, considers beauty to be a mental construct that is somehow connected to the feelings and emotions of individuals¹⁶ and lacks any kind of external reality. In the opinion of these people, human beings have been created in such a way that they see beauty when they look at certain objects, see ugliness when they look at others and understand still other concepts when they observe other things. Beauty is a subjective concept that is relative to the personal inclinations and feelings of individuals. Beauty depends upon the person sensing the object and it is not a quality that inheres in the thing being sensed. In the words of an expert in this field: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'¹⁷

According to this view, beauty is something completely relative. It is possible that something appears beautiful to one person while it appears ugly for others. It is also possible that something is beautiful in

the opinion of a group of people in one time period and in another time that same group considers it to be ugly. Beauty changes when it changes its geographical location. The thing that is beautiful in England will not necessarily be beautiful in India what to say of Persia. [18](#) When someone says: 'That is a beautiful sight,' then he has simply expressed his personal tastes and feelings. If we see that many things appear ugly to us and at the same time appear beautiful for certain animals [19](#) (such as is the case with things that we eat or smell) or if we see that some things are beautiful for white people while those same things are ugly in the eyes of blacks then all of these things are proofs that beauty is something is a subjective concept that reflects the tastes and feelings of individuals. Thus, we cannot find any traces of it in the external world. Therefore, it is meaningless to say that those statements that comprise concepts such as beauty and ugliness are true or false. If someone says: 'That flower is beautiful,' then we cannot say that he is right or wrong in his claim. The reason for this is that this is simply a matter of his personal tastes and feelings that he experiences when he comes face to face with this flower and that he expresses using such statements.

An Examination Of The Different Views Regarding Ethical Goodness And Evil

After having gained a brief acquaintance with some of the most important views regarding the concepts of physical beauty and ugliness now the time has come for us to examine the different view regarding ethical goodness and evil. Upon careful assessment of the questions that were mentioned in the beginning of the current discussion it will be known that we are not simply seeking to linguistically define the words 'good' and 'bad' and their synonyms. In other words, we are not trying to discover words that can serve as replacements for 'good'. In clearer terms, we are seeking to analyze the word 'good' from a phenomenological approach not from linguistic one.

It is only natural that each one of the different ethical schools of thought has its own special explanation of goodness and evil. It is even possible to say that there are as many different views regarding the concepts of goodness and evil as there have been different kinds of ethical schools of thought in the history of mankind. Principally, one of the most important factors in the genesis of the manifold ethical schools of thought is the various interpretations that they have made regarding the concepts of 'good' and 'evil'. Schools of thought such as: Hedonism, Evolutionism, Intuitivism, Socialism, Sentimentalism and the Divine Command Theory have each presented their own special definition of 'good' and 'evil' that we will scrutinize in detail when we examine the ethical schools of thought. In general, however, we can categorize the different views regarding this matter into five distinct groups.

External Existence

Some of the Philosophers of Ethics hold that the concepts of good and evil are quiddities and first intelligibles. This means that they possess an independent external existence. Some of the actions of

men such as justice, trustworthiness and truthfulness possess a real quality in the external world named 'goodness'. Some other actions such as oppression, disloyalty and lying possess a real and objective quality named 'evil'. Of course, such qualities cannot be grasped through the faculties of sense perception as are smell and sound. However, the power of reason is able to comprehend them without the need to intellectually abstract them with the help of the faculties of sense perception.

This is the opinion of many philosophers, amongst them being Nelson²⁰, K. Nelson²¹, Copelston²² and G. E. Moore (1873 – 1958).²³ He was of the belief that the concept of 'good' is a concept that tells of a real quality of things and actions and that exists in the external world. Of course, he understands the intuitive power of the intelligence to be the tool by means of which we comprehend such a concept not the apparent senses. It is for this reason that his school of thought has been named as 'Intuitivism'. In the opinion of Moore, the concept of 'good' is a self-evident one, is simple and is incapable of being defined.

He says:

If you ask me: 'What is good?' then in response I will say that good is good and this is the most you can say about it. If you ask me: 'How can we define goodness?' I will answer that goodness is incapable of being defined and this is the most we can say about this matter.²⁴

Therefore, he understands the concept of goodness to be the basis of all other ethical value and command concepts and he defines them all using it. For example, in defining 'responsibility' he says: It is an action that creates more 'good' in this world than does anything that resembles it.'²⁵

Russell (1872 – 1970) also, at least in one time period of his life, was deeply influenced by Moore in his ethical meditations. He believed that good and evil are two qualities that are related to things, independent of our opinion just as something's being a square or a circle is the same.²⁶

A Sign Of The Feelings And Emotions Of The Speaker

There is another view regarding the concepts 'good' and 'bad' that resembles the third view about beauty and ugliness. This view is that man has been created with certain special inclinations, emotions and feelings each of which or all of which demand a certain action. This means that there is a correspondence between certain actions and the desires which cause those actions to be attributed with being good. On the other hand, certain actions are not in line with these desires and inclinations and therefore, they are attributed with being evil. In any case the concepts 'good' and 'evil' do nothing but express the emotions and personal inclinations of the speaker without having any connection with the world outside us and without describing anything about the beings, individuals or actions that exist in the external world. Neither do they relate any quality to those things nor do they negate any quality from them.

The presence of an ethical concept in a proposition does not increase its objective meaning. For

example, if we say to someone: 'You have done something bad by stealing that money,' we have not [objectively] said anything other than: 'You have stolen the money.' By adding the phrase: 'You have done something bad,' we have not related anything [about what has transpired in the external world]. Rather, we have only conveyed the fact that our ethical opinion does not accept such an action. This is exactly as if we were to say in a tone expressive of our astonishment: 'You have stolen the money!' The tone of our voice that seeks to express our astonishment and also the exclamatory sign do not add anything to the objective meaning of the statement. They only seek to convey the fact that the expression of such a statement by the speaker was accompanied by some emotions.[27](#)

Absolute Convention

The third view is that the reality of goodness and evil is something man-made and conventional. When a certain group of people see that a certain action corresponds to their goals, they conceive the quality of 'goodness' for it and if they see that another action does not accord to their goals, they label it as being 'bad'. In other words, the concepts of ethical goodness and evil resemble that of property, matrimony, leadership and the likes of these which are discussed in the science of law. This means that neither do they possess an extension in the world outside us nor does any real human emotion attach itself to them. Rather, they are simply man-made conventional concepts that have been formed by an individual or society for various reasons and with different intentions.

The Divine Command Theory

According to the Divine Command Theory, the actions of human beings do not possess any essential goodness without taking into consideration the command of God. The examination of this view, which can be found in the theological literature of the Muslims under the title of 'Divine and Religious Good and Evil', has a long history. The problem of the goodness and evil of actions is a problem that was seriously discussed from the time of the sages of ancient Greece. A casual glance at the debates between Socrates and Euzyme clearly demonstrates this fact.

In this debate Euzyme claims that it is the command of God that makes something good. In response, Socrates asks: 'Is it that since God has ordered something that it is correct or because it is correct that God has ordered it?' Euzyme answers that since it is correct God has commanded us to do it. In this way the debate continues.[28](#) This is exactly the same discussion that was extensively and fruitfully conducted in the Islamic world by Muslim theologians and philosophers. In current times some of the famous Shia scholars[29](#) have occupied themselves with this discussion revivifying it, solving some of its difficulties and clarifying many of its obscure dimensions. It seems that many of the facets of this question still are in need of scrutinizing research.

A History Of The Discussion Amongst The Muslim Thinkers

From the time that Muslim thinkers came face to face with this problem they found themselves divided into two groups. The Shiites, the Mutazilah³⁰ and some of the Hanafiyyah³¹ believed that goodness and evil are two of the essential qualities inherent in actions and that the intelligence of man only has the power to comprehend the goodness and evil of some actions. The commands and prohibitions of God simply serve to disclose this reality. The goodness of a good deed is something that is hidden within its essence and it is for this reason that God commands us to perform it. The evil of a bad deed is also essential to it and it is for this reason that God prohibits us from doing it.

In contrast, the Asharis³² were adamant about the fact that the command and prohibition of God are what create the goodness and evil of actions and it is not true to say that goodness and evil are things that are essential to actions. Religion simply does not disclose goodness and evil for us. In the words of the Asharis themselves:

الحسن ما حسَّنه الشرع والقبيح ما قَبَّحه الشرع

‘Goodness is that which religion has deemed to be good and evil is what it has deemed to be evil.’

Therefore, if God were to command us to lie then it would become good and if He were to prohibit us from speaking the truth then it would become in turn evil.

It should not be left unsaid that the view of the Adliyyah not only accords with the first view, in other words, that goodness and evil are two objective entities in the external world, but also is in line with the second that held that they are secondary intelligibles and philosophical concepts. The view of the Asharis, however, is exactly the same as that which has been named amongst western philosophers as the ‘Divine Command Theory’ and is also an instance of the theory that held that such concepts are conventional (with the difference that from the point of view of the Asharis it is the command and prohibitions of God that make something good or evil not the emotions and feelings of an individual or group).

The Meaning Of Good And Evil And The Claim Of The Asharis

In order for the topic of discussion to become clear and also in order for the claim of the Asharis to become more clarified it is necessary that we now mention some of the different meanings of good and evil that have been mentioned in the theological and usuli³³ books for good and evil. Whilst doing so, it is also essential for us to delineate the differences and similarities between the views of the Asharis and the Adliyyah.

Perfection And Deficiency

Based on one terminological meaning, 'good' means perfection while 'bad' means deficiency. When it is said: 'Knowledge is good,' then this implies that knowledge is perfection and when it is said that: 'Ignorance is bad,' then this means that it is a deficiency and imperfection. It should not be left unsaid that based upon this meaning here we are not taking into consideration the harmony that knowledge has with the perfection that we are seeking and the disharmony that ignorance has with the same nor are we considering the praiseworthiness of knowledge in the eyes of the intellect verses ignorance. Also, it should be known that this meaning of goodness and evil is not something that is solely a quality of the actions of man rather it also includes external beings. For example, when it is said: 'A fruitful tree is good and a withered one is bad,' then this meaning of goodness and evil are being intended.

The Asharis are unanimous upon the fact that this meaning of goodness and evil is something that the intelligence can fathom independently and also state that goodness and evil in this meaning are essential qualities of the actions of man and things existing in the external world.[34](#)

Being In Accord With Or In Opposition To Temperament

Another meaning that has been mentioned for goodness and evil, and that is also unanimously agreed upon by everyone, is anything that is in accord with the inclinations and desires of man is good while anything that is not is bad. For example, smoking cigarettes is good for people that are apt to do so since it is something that is in line with their temperament and the structure of their bodies. It is necessary to remind our readers that in this meaning the dimension of perfection or deficiency of the thing or action under question in relation to man is not being taken to consideration.

Being In Accord With Or Opposition To A Goal

Another meaning that has been mentioned for 'good' and 'bad' is being in accord or opposition to the purpose of man. Beauty and ugliness, based upon this meaning and in contrast to the previous one in which they were not abstracted from a locus outside the soul of the human being, is abstracted from the real relation that exists between something or an action and the goal or purpose [for which it is performed]. In order to explain:

If there be a positive relation between something or some action and the goal that someone has taken into consideration then that thing or action will be attributed with being good. If, on the other hand, there be a negative relation between the two then it will be attributed with being bad. For example, it is said: 'A saw is good for carpentry but it is bad for watch-making.' Sometimes this meaning has been referred to as 'expediency and unsuitability.'[35](#) Just as has become clear from the examples this meaning [of the term] is not something solely relegated for the actions of man rather it encompasses within its fold other things as well. It is unanimously agreed that this meaning of goodness and evil is rational in nature. The

Asharis also admit that the human intelligence has the capability to comprehend such qualities in things without the help of religion.

It should not be left unsaid that since the goals of men differ in nature goodness and evil in this meaning of the term will be relative qualities. For example, killing Zayd is something evil in the eyes of his friends since it is something that stands detriment to their goals and ideals while it is something acceptable and good in the eyes of his enemies since it accords to their goals. In other words, the relative nature of this meaning [of goodness and evil] is exactly like the relativity of cause and effect. Meaning, it changes when that which it is connected to changes not when the view, tastes or temperament [of individuals] change.

In the same way that a specific thing may really be, from a certain vantage point, a cause of some thing and not be its effect, a certain action may be good when compared with a specific goal and [from this point of view] it will not be bad. Of course, it is equally possible for the same action to be evil and bad when compared to another goal just as it is possible for the cause [we previously mentioned] to be the effect of something other than its effect. In any case, however, these are not things that are dependent upon the individual tastes and personal temperaments of individuals.

Praise And Scorn

The fourth connotation that has been mentioned for good and bad in the books of Theology and Usul is that 'good' means the action that is praised by all intelligent beings of this world and the agent of that action is someone who deserves reward in the next life as a recompense for it while 'bad' is the action that is scorned by them and its agent deserves to be to be punished for it in the next life. There is a difference of opinion amongst the Asharis and the Adliyah on this meaning of the terms 'good and 'bad,' that are solely relegated for those actions of man that stem from his free-will. The Adliyah are of the opinion that the intelligence does have the ability to comprehend the standard by means of which we can say that some actions deserve praise while others deserve scorn. On the other hand, the Asharis say that the human intelligence does not possess such a capability. This group holds that unless they are commanded or prohibited by God the actions of men do not possess any goodness or evil in and of themselves. If such qualities do not exist for the actions of men, then it is only natural that the intelligence does not have the ability to comprehend that they do. [Since, it is impossible for the intelligence to see something where it does not even exist].

Mullah Abdur Razzaq Lhiji explains the view of the Adliyyah and the Asharis regarding this meaning of the terms 'good' and 'bad' in the following way:

مراد از عقلی بودن حسن و قبح، آن است که عقل تواند دانست ممدوحیت نفس الامری و مذمومیت نفس الامری بعضی از افعال را، اگر چه شرع بر آن وارد نشده باشد...مراد از شرعی بودن حسن و قبح، آن است که عقل را نرسد نه ادراک حسن و قبح، و نه ادراک جهات حسن و قبح، در هیچ فعلی از افعال: نه پیش از ورود شرع و نه بعد

‘When we say that goodness and evil are intelligible this means that the intelligence has the ability to understand that certain actions really deserve to be praised or really deserved to be scorned even though a command or prohibition from religion has not reached us with regards to it. It can also mean that it has the capability to comprehend why religion has praised or scorned some action if something of the sort has reached us from religion... [In contrast,] the meaning of goodness and evil being religious in nature is that the intelligence does not have the ability to comprehend the goodness and evil [in this meaning of the terms] of any of the actions, nor why they are good or bad, neither before a religious edict nor after one.’³⁶

An Explanation Regarding The View Of The Asharis

What do the Asharis intend when they deny the goodness and evil of actions? Do they deny the intelligibility of goodness and evil or do they also deny essential goodness and evil? Do they hold that we cannot prove that certain actions are good and evil or do they intend to say that actions are not good or evil in and of themselves? Do they really wish to say that justice is only good and oppression only evil because God has commanded one of them and prohibited the other and that if we suppose that God were to prohibit us from being just it would be bad and oppression would become good?

The reality of the matter is that there are a number of different expressions [regarding this matter] in the works of the scholars of the Ashari school of thought. The apparent meaning of some of their sayings supports the first possibility while the apparent meaning of some of their other expressions strengthens the second possibility. However, in any case, we will hereunder mention some possible interpretations for their view and then fairly and rationally evaluate each of them.

1. The first possibility is that the Asharis intend to say that man’s intellect does not have the capability to the comprehend goodness and evil of each and every one of man’s actions and responsibilities and it is for this very reason that it needs the message of the prophets. In order to explain, even though the intelligence has the ability to comprehend the principles of religious beliefs it is incapable of understanding particular matters of beliefs as well as most of the problems related to man’s religious responsibilities. For example, Man’s intelligence cannot comprehend many of the events that will take place in the Resurrection: The pain that man experiences when his soul is taken from his body, the punishment in the grave, the questioning of Munkar and Nakir in the grave, the stations of the Day of Resurrection, the Bridge and the Scales and the likes of these are examples of matters related to the Afterlife which the human mind would not have understood [had religion not have told him that such events will indeed take place].

Or for example, the number of units in each of the prayers, the manner in which the ritual prayer and fast are to be carried out, the specific timings of the acts of worship, the fact that it is recommended to fast

on the last day of Shaban while it is obligatory to fast on the first day of Ramadan and prohibited to fast on the first day of Shawwal (the Eid al Fitr) are all matter that transcend the intelligence and it is silent with regards to them. It is incapable of comprehending the goodness and evil of such actions. There is no other way to understand their goodness and or evil than by taking help from the guidance of divine revelation. In this regard the role of revelation is to disclose the essential goodness and or evil of actions to us. Based upon this interpretation, the Asharis share the same view as the Adliyyah as regards the reality of goodness and evil. On the other hand, since they believe in the incapability of human intelligence, they adhere to the divine command theory when it comes to the comprehension of the goodness and evil of actions.

If this is what the Asharis intend when they deny goodness and evil then it is justifiable and capable of being defended. We also believe that one of the principal reasons that the human race is in need of the divine message and the succor of the prophets is the imperfections of human intelligence. The intellect cannot independently comprehend all of the diverse dimensions of the path to felicity, the perils that lead to damnation and also the cause-and-effect relationship that exists between the deeds of men and the consequences that they will entail in the afterlife.[37](#)

However, something more can than this can be gathered from what has been related from the Asharis. They clearly state that without the religious edict in the external world the actions of men lack inherent goodness and or evil in and of themselves. It is the commands and prohibitions of God that make them good and evil. For example, Cushji, after stating that goodness and evil are religious in nature, says:

‘The proof for this matter is that all actions are equal from the point of view of goodness and evil. There is no action that, in and of itself, deserves praise, or whose agent deserves to be rewarded or punished. It is only the command and prohibition of God that gives them such a quality.’[38](#)

2. The second possibility that can be mentioned as an interpretation for the claim of the Asharis is that their Divine Command Theory is of the third type [that we mentioned previously]. Meaning, they hold that goodness and evil are conventional qualities that are made and which lack any basis in external reality. If some action is good while another is bad then this depends upon the type of convention that a certain society or group of individuals formed. Of course, it is equally possible for general and international conventions to exist but since we are Muslims and obey the laws of God we see the root of all conventions to be His commands and prohibitions. Whatever He made good we understand to be good and whatever He considers as bad we will also count as being bad.

This interpretation is more in line with the sayings of the Asharis. As was mentioned in the explanation of the first possibility, the Asharis claim that the actions that stem from the free-will of human beings cannot have such qualities nor is it possible for us to comprehend such qualities in them. Therefore, from their point of view, goodness and evil are not quiddities such that they might possess an external existence nor are they philosophical concepts such that they might have a locus from which they might be abstracted nor are they connected to the personal tastes and feelings of human beings. Thus, they

are not related in any way to beings in the external world. Rather, they are a type of divine convention.

Possessing A Source Of Abstraction In The External World

In our opinion 'goodness and evil' as well as 'must and must not' are not indications of the feelings and emotions of the speaker nor are they simply conventions (whether the one making them be the intelligence of an individual, a society or the command and prohibitions of God); rather, they are real concepts possessing an external existence. Of course, they do not exist in the way quiddities do such that they might possess an independent external existence. Rather, they are of the type of philosophical concepts that have a source of abstraction in the external world. In terms that we have been using up till now their occurrence is mental while they are attributed of things in the external world.

This is exactly like the second view regarding physical beauty that understood the reality of beauty to be the harmoniousness of external things. We also hold that in order for the mind to abstract the concept of goodness there has to be some accordance and harmony between two things. Of course, this accordance and harmony should be between two real beings in the external world and should not depend upon the personal tastes and preferences of individuals.[39](#)

Even though it is possible that one of the two sides [of this relationship] is a human being but it is not because he has a certain temperament rather because certain perfection will come into being for him in the external world. On side [of this relation] is an action that stems from man's free-will and the other side is his real perfection that is sought to be brought into existence in the external world. Every action that leads to that desired perfection and serves to help us attain it will be 'good'. Every action that distances man from that will be 'bad'.

Therefore, the goodness and evil of a certain action of man will only be grasped after intellectual contemplation and a comparison between that action and the perfection that is desired [to be brought about through it]. The goodness and evil of all actions cannot be solved using the personal tastes or conventions of individuals. Is it possible for us to reach an agreement that from now on oppression will be good and justice will be evil? Principally speaking, how can we comprehend that this agreement, which is in itself one of the deeds of man, is good or bad? Is this to be solved by another agreement [ad infinitum]?

In other words, when we compare each one of the deeds of men with the perfection that is desired for them then three possibilities come into play, rationally speaking: The first is that there is a positive relationship between them. This means that performing those actions helps us attain that ultimate perfection. In this case we name these actions as 'good.' The second is that there is a negative relation between the two. In other words, performing those actions hinders us from reaching that perfection. Such actions will be described as being bad. The third possibility is that there be no relation between the deed and the sought-after perfection, neither positive nor negative. In this case, such actions (if they should happen to exist) will neither be good nor bad. Terminologically speaking, in relation to the desired

human perfection they have a neutral value.

In conclusion, the standard by means of which we can measure the goodness and evil of actions is their being conducive or preventive to the goal desired for humanity. In other words, the concepts of ethical goodness and evil can be considered an extension of the concept 'causality.' In the same way that the concepts of cause and effect are abstracted from things existing in the external world and can be justifiably attributed to those things, goodness and evil is also abstracted from the casual relationship that exists between the deeds of man and the perfection that is desired for him and thus can be justifiably attributed to them.

The Root Of Ethical Differences

With the explanation that we have just presented for the standard of goodness and evil of deeds an important point becomes clarified. That is the secret behind the differences that exists between different nations and societies regarding the goodness and or evil of certain actions. In order to explain, some actions are considered good in some societies while they are considered bad in certain others. Famous examples of this are the slaughtering of animals which is considered an evil action by some Indians or the drinking of wine and eating of the meat of pigs in the eyes of some Western people while the same are considered respectively good and evil by Muslims. Many philosophers take this difference of opinion as a proof to substantiate the claim that ethics is relative.

However, with the explanation that we have just presented it can be understood that the source of such differences of opinion can be possibly one of two things: 1. An improper understanding of the truly deserving perfection of man that stems from a faulty world view. 2. An improper comprehension of the true relationship that exists between the deeds of men and their sought-after perfection. In other words, even though such individuals may have properly understood what is the true perfection of man they do not accurately understand what effects our actions have in helping us attain such a desired perfection.

Therefore, if we wish to eliminate the differences that exist between different societies regarding ethical matters and that all individuals and societies have a common understanding of what actions are good and bad along with correcting their understanding of the perfection that is proper to human beings it is necessary to take recourse to the divine message of religion. Without a doubt, the human mind has the ability to independently comprehend, in many instances, the relations between certain deeds and the consequences that accrue from them. It is for this reason that we see less of a difference of opinion amongst human societies in regards to ethical principles. The problems that have been labeled by the scholars of Usul as 'mustaqillat e aqli' (things that are comprehended by the intellect independent of religion) are all of such a nature. However, there are many other instances, especially in the particular applications of those general principles, where the intelligence does not find within itself such a capability. The comprehension of such matters lies outside the scope of the powers of human intelligence. In the words of Mowlavi:

‘There is no way for the intellect to go over to that side.’

It is here that it stands in need of the help of revelation. By explaining the relations between such actions and the desired perfection of man, religion helps the intellect discover the secret relation that exists between them. Therefore, in such cases relying on religion, the intellect accepts the goodness or evil of certain actions. This is in fact one God’s favors to men. This has been beautifully put in the following way:

الواجبات الشرعية الطاف في الوجبات العقلية

‘The obligations of religion are favors in relation to the obligations of the intellect.’

1. *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, "Ethics", Baruch Spinoza, p179–180.
2. "Ethics", Spinoza, p. 154–155.
3. *Al Ilahiyyat min al Shifa*; p. 380–381; *al Hikmah al Muta’aliyyah*, v. 7, p. 58.
4. *Taj al Urus*, v. 3, p. 194.
5. *Pishniyazhaye Mudiriyat Islami*, p. 107–119.
6. *Akhlaq Nikumakus*, ch 1, p. 1.
7. It seems that the concepts good and bad are self-evident and cannot be defined properly speaking. The reason for this is that any attempt to define good and bad depends upon one understanding that certain definitions are better than others (such as the definition that possesses both genus and differentia) and that when one defines something it is best to use those types of definitions that are better than others. (Tr.).
8. *Al Mizan fi Tafsir al Qur’an*, v. 5, p. 9–11.
9. *The History of Philosophy*, Copelston, v. 1, p. 291; *Manaye Zibai*, Eric Newton, p. 375, 33–34; *Kuliyat Ziba Shinasi*, p. 7.
10. This could perhaps be because the power of reason understands that this flower possesses a certain amount of mathematical harmony.
11. The senses are capable of perceiving accidents such as color, smell etc. They cannot, however, perceive that there is a substance that these accidents adhere in. It is the power of reason that concludes that there must be a substance upon which they adhere. This is the substance that we name ‘a physical body’ of which these accidents are effects. For an acquaintance with the proofs for the existence of substance refer to the *Elements of Muslim Metaphysics*, by the late Allamah Tabatabai. (Tr.).
12. *Manaye Zibai*, p. 33–34.
13. *Kuliyat Ziba Shinasi*, p. 8–9; *Manaye Honar*, p. 2–7
14. We prove this in the following way: (1) If beauty were a quiddity that existed in the external world, then it would either be a substance or an accident. (2) It cannot, however, be a substance, since if were a substance then it would either be an immaterial substance or a material one. (3) If it were a material substance it could not be predicated for immaterial beings, which is clearly not the case. (4) If it were an immaterial substance then it could not be predicated for material beings. This is also clearly untrue. (5) If beauty were an accident thing would not be substantially beautiful. This is also clearly untrue.
15. *Manaye honar*, p. 2.
16. *Kuliyat Ziba Shinasi*, p. 53–87; *Baztab Kar wa Tabiyyat dar Honar*, p. 88–90; *Zaban, Haqiqat wa Mantiq*, p. 157.
17. *A Theory of Art*, S. D. Ross, p. 35.
18. *Manaye Honar*, p. 15.
19. Of course, there is a difference of opinion as to whether or not animals also have a sense of beauty. Some, like Darwin,

adamantly defend this view and the same can be inferred from some of the sayings of Allamah Tabatabai (Usul al Falsafah, v. 2, p. 200). Others are of the opinion that animals do not have a sense of smell. (See: Baztab Kar wa Tabiyyat dar Honar, p. 73–75).

[20.](#) ‘Moore, George Edward’ in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 5, p. 379–380.

[21.](#) ‘Ethics, Problems of’ in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 128–129.

[22.](#) History of Philosophy, Frederick Copelston, v. 8, p. 445–447.

[23.](#) Of course, some others are of the belief that it can be inferred from some of the sayings of Moore that he understands the concept of good to be an abstract one and a secondary intelligible. See: Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 200–203.

[24.](#) Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 9.

[25.](#) A History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 8, p. 445–448.

[26.](#) A History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 8, p. 512.

[27.](#) Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, p. 145–146.

[28.](#) ‘Morality and Religion’ in Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, p. 496–497; Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 75.

[29.](#) Al Fawaed, p. 320–327; Nihayah al Dirayah fi Sharh al Kifayah, v. 2, p. 44, 318–319; Durus fi al Ilm al usul, v. 1, p. 361–362.

[30.](#) Kashf al Murad, p. 302; Sharh al Faraed, p. 330; Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 199.

[31.](#) Isharat al Maram, p. 75–78.

[32.](#) Al Iqtisad fi al Itiqad, p. 186–197; al Mahsul fi Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 123; al Tahsil min al Mahsul, v. 1, p. 180, al Barahin dar Ilm Kalam, v. 1, p. 246–250; Sharh al Mawaqif, v. 8, p. 181–195; Dirasat Aqliyyahwa Ruhiyyah fi al Falsafah al Islamiyyah, p. 257–258.

[33.](#) Sarmaye Iman, p. 60–61; Matareh al Anzar, p. 230–232, Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 200–202; Sharh Tajrid al Itiqad, Qushji, p. 327–328; al Mahsul fi Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 123–124; al Tahsil min al Mahsul, v. 1, p. 180–181; Sharh al Mawaqif, v. 8, p. 182; Falsafah al Shariyah, p. 270–273.

[34.](#) After pointing out the meaning of good and evil ibn Taymiyyah says the following regarding this meaning of good and evil: There are some individuals that affirm a third meaning for good and evil and have claimed that there is a consensus of opinion regarding it. This meaning is that goodness refers to an action being the cause of an attribute of perfection or an attribute of imperfection. This is a third meaning that most of the previous theologians have not mentioned in this problem however some of the later theologians have mentioned it such as Razi, who had taken it from the philosophers.’ Majmuah al Fatawa, v. 8, p. 186–187.

[35.](#) Sharh al Mawaqif, v. 8, p. 182; Sharh Tajrid al Itiqad, Qushji, p. 338.

[36.](#) Sarmaye Iman, p. 59.

[37.](#) Ma’arif Qur’an p. 9–30; Akhlaq dar Qur’an, v. 1, p. 103–110; Nazariyyeh Siyasi Islam, v. 1, p. 58–60.

[38.](#) Sharh Tajrid al Itiqad, p. 338.

[39.](#) Pishniyazhaye Mudiriyyat Islami, p. 107–112.

Chapter 5: The Reality Of Ethical Statements

In the first chapter we stated that the most important discussions of the Philosophy of Ethics are the following three general discussions: (1) discussions revolving around the meanings [of ethical concepts], (2) the logical connections [between ethical propositions] and (3) epistemological discussions surrounding ethical propositions. The main axis around which the discussions that we have conducted up till now have revolved have been the meaning of ethical concepts. While doing so we have also gained an acquaintance with some of the logical discussions about ethical propositions and concepts.

Now the time has come to examine one of the most important epistemological discussions about ethical propositions that can be considered the most important and fundamental problems of the Philosophy of Ethics. This is whether the reality of ethical propositions are declaratory or conventional?

There can be no doubt in the fact that all of the philosophers and thinkers that have occupied themselves with this question were completely aware of the fact that in common language ethical rules can be equally expressed in both ways. In order to express the fact that acting justly is something good human beings sometimes use declaratory statements such as: 'Acting justly is something good.' Often however, they express this as a command and in a conventional manner: 'Be just,' or: 'One must act justly.' Or in order to express the propriety of telling the truth, in accordance with what the situation demands, they may say: 'Telling the truth is something good.' At other times they may use sentences such as: 'Tell the truth,' or: 'One must tell the truth.' The same goes for the other actions of men that stem from their free-will and are ethically judged by others.

However, we know that declaratory statements and conventional ones possess fundamental differences between them and it is impossible to really combine in one instance. If in some instances certain rules are expressed in both ways, such as is the case with these ethical commands, then in reality one of the two manners of expressions are metaphorical and have been thus expressed for certain psychological and educational reasons. Aside from this it is not possible for one statement to be really a conventional statement and also a declaratory one at the same time. It is for this reason that everyone that has thought about matters in the Philosophy of Ethics and have written anything in this regard have found themselves face to face with this vital question: What is the reality of ethical propositions?

Are they conventional or are they declaratory? In other words, are ethical propositions ones that cognitive? Meaning, is it possible for us to understand their truth or falsehood? Or are they non-cognitive in nature? We can express this in yet a third way: Are they inventive/creative or do they disclose [something for us]? Meaning, are they conventional, man-made and invented by individuals without having any basis in external realities or are they real and true statements by means of which external reality is revealed to us?

Of course, by taking up a stance in this topic some of the other epistemological problems surrounding ethical statements will automatically be resolved. For example, (1) the problem of the standard by means of which we divide the intellect into the practical intellect and the theoretical one, (2) the problem of whether the faculty that comprehends ethical rules is different from the one that comprehends the rules of the other sciences and disciplines or not (and that man does not have more than one faculty of comprehension), (3) the problem of the intelligibility of ethical statements and (4) the type of demonstrations that are used in ethics are some of the questions the answer to which depend upon resolving whether ethical propositions are declaratory or conventional.

Declaration And Convention

Even though the difference between declaration and convention is something that is clear for everyone in order for us to enter the forthcoming discussions with more of an open eye it is only fitting that we first of all indicate the definition of declaratory and conventional statements and the differences that exist between them.

In most of the books on Logic¹ after dividing words into simple and composite words and then mentioning the different types of simple words the following is mentioned regarding composite words: There are two types of composite words: Complete and Incomplete. The incomplete composite is the one that is composed in such a way that even though the listener may have heard it he still waits for the speaker to complete it. In the parlance of the logicians: 'It is not proper [for the listener or speaker] to remain silent after it.' For example, if someone says: 'The value of every man is equal to his...' and thereafter remains silent he has uttered an incomplete composite statement. Of course, incomplete composite words are themselves divided into other sub-categories that can be sought out in the books on Logic. In contrast the complete composite word is that which is composed in such a way that its subject and predicate or precedent and antecedent have been expressed in a complete manner. After having heard it, the listener does not wait for the speaker to complete his statement. Terminologically speaking: 'It is proper [for the speaker or listener] to remain silent after having heard or uttered such a statement.' For example: 'The value of every human being is equal to the good deeds that he has performed.'

The complete composite statement, between the parts of which there is a comprehensive relation, can itself be divided into two types: Declaratory ones and Conventional ones. In the parlance of the logicians, complete composite and declaratory words are often named 'propositions' or 'speech' and their distinctive quality is that they are capable of being attributed as being true or false. Sentences such as the following: 'The Iranian Revolution achieved victory in the year 57,' and: 'In the future the power of government will fall in the hands of the oppressed and down-trodden,' can be considered of such a nature since if what they declare accords with reality then they are true and if not then they are false. In other words, a declaratory statement is one that has a stable reality aside from its words and the form of the sentence simply seeks to express that reality.

In contrast, the complete, composite and conventional sentence cannot be attributed with being true or false. In other terms, it does not possess an unchanging truth aside from the words used in it. Rather, the complete relation that exists between its parts is created with the existence of the words themselves. Sentences such as the following: "Be trustworthy," "Do not befriend evil people," "Do you know the effects of not enjoining the good and forbidding the evil?" "Oh chivalrous ones!" "I wish that oppression was eradicated from the world!" "What a virtuous man!" are different examples of statements that are of the conventional type. Such statements cannot essentially be attributed with being true or false. In other words, it is not possible to ask the following question with regards to any of them: 'Do they accord with

reality or not?' The reason for this is that their 'reality' is created the moment that they are uttered and before this they do not possess any sort of truth or reality whatsoever.

It should be noted that the topic of declarations and conventions and also the reality of declaratory and conventional statements is one of the discussions that was focused upon in this century by the Usuli scholars. They have presented many novels and at the same time diverse views and thoughts in this field.² In order to gain an acquaintance with some of the hairsplitting analysis of the Usulis on this problem it is only proper that one take a glance at a list of some of the problems that was the focus of their attention:

(1) Does the difference between declaratory and conventional statements lie in their *madlul e tasawwuri* (the conception that the statement conveys) or their *madlul e tasdiqi* (the proposition that it conveys)?³

(2) Does their difference lie in the intention with which they were made? In other words, if someone utters a statement with the intention of relating something regarding the external world then that statement will be declarative while if the same statement is uttered with the intention of creating something therein then the statement will be conventional. Or does the intention to create something have nothing to do with and has no effect upon the conventional nature of a statement?

(3) Does the difference between declaratory and conventional statements lie in the manner in which they relate [something about the external world]? In other words, if by uttering some statement someone intends to express a relation that already exists therein then his statement will be declaratory and otherwise it will be conventional. Or, does their difference lie in that which they seek to relate and express not the manner in which they express it? Meaning that, if what they seek to relate is the existence of a relation and its reality then the sentence will be declaratory while if they seek to recount the creation of a relation and its coming into existence after having once not existed then it will be conventional.⁴

(4) Is the standard by means of which we can judge the truth and or falsehood of declaratory statements the *qasd e jiddi* (the sincere intention of the speaker) or their *qasd e istimali* (the intention of the speaker to use a word in the meaning it was coined for)?⁵

(5) Is the standard of the truth and falsehood of a statement its *hikayat e tasdiqi* (the proposition that it conveys) or *wujud nisbat e tammah* (the existence of its complete relation)?⁶

This a list of some of the profound and hairsplitting discussions of the scholars of Usul and that are, in their own place, very beneficial and helpful.

An Examination Of A Few Views

When we scrutinize the matters and views that were mentioned in the previous chapter regarding the definability and un-definability of ethical concepts then it will become clear that there are a number of

different types of views regarding the ikhbari and or inhsai nature of ethical propositions. The reason for this is that the first step in solving this problem and the corner stone upon which it rests is the semantic analysis of ethical concepts. It is only natural that any stance that we adopt there will have a direct effect upon this problem.

Therefore, it is possible to divide the different ethical schools of thought keeping this problem in mind into two general groups: Descriptive and Non-Descriptive or ones that are founded upon the fact that ethical statements seek to 'create' something in the external world and ones that adhere to the fact that they seek to 'disclose' something about it. The following schools of thought can be considered to be amongst those that believe that ethical propositions are inshai in nature and that they do not intend to describe anything regarding reality: Imperativism, Emotivism, Socialistic, the Divine-Command and the Conventionalist theories. In contrast to such groups, there are a number of different kinds of Naturalistic, Intuitivist and Philosophical theories. Such theories must be subsumed under those theories that hold that ethical propositions are declarative in nature.

Therefore, here we will briefly criticize and evaluate some of the most important schools of thought and views that can be subsumed under 'Descriptive' and 'Non-Descriptive' ethical schools of thought. Further explanation regarding such schools of thought should be relegated for the section of this ethical research project that will deal with an [independent] examination and critical analysis of the different ethical schools of thought.

Non-Descriptive Schools Of Thought

Imperativism

Imperativists are of the opinion that, even though some ethical propositions are apparently declarative, they are all in reality commands. 'One must speak the truth,' and 'Speaking the truth is good,' are misleading statements whose real form has been altered from the following proposition: 'Tell the truth.'⁷ Statements that are expressed in the form of a command are inshai in nature and therefore, one cannot speak of their being true or false. The reason for this is that they do not express anything regarding the real world such that if they were to be in accord with that, they would be true while if they were not in accord with that they would be false.

Emotivism

Emotivists understand ethical propositions to be simply expressive of the manner in which the speaker has personally understood [something] and his individual feelings about it. It is clear that such personal takes on a subject cannot be attributed with truth or falsehood.⁸ For example, if someone says: 'I like coffee,' it is not correct to say that he is expressing something regarding a truth that exists in the external world. The same goes if someone should say that: 'Telling the truth is good.' Meaning, by uttering such a statement he has not anything other than expressed his emotions and personal feelings.

In other words, when we have accepted on the basis of logical positivism that meaningful statements are limited to analytical statements and those propositions that are made with regards to realities that are capable of being verified through experimentation, then it necessarily follows that ethical propositions are meaningless and that they lack any epistemological value. The reason for this is that ethical rules are not analytical nor are they justifiable by means of sense experiment. Consequently, they are not capable of being true or false. This is because a statement's being true or false depends upon it having a meaning.[9](#)

It should not be left unsaid that based upon the view of emotivists when an individual utters an ethical rule, he has sought to create by means of this proposition his temperament and personal tastes and he does not even seek to relate anything regarding his mental condition. Otherwise, it would be necessary to say that the emotivists were adherents of the Descriptive theories even while they explicitly say that ethical statements, in opposition to their apparent form, are insubstantial and do not possess any epistemological value. In brief, in the view of Emotivists:

The distinctive feature of ethical judgments does not lie in the fact that they express the beliefs of the speaker [regarding reality] rather they lie in the fact that they show us his temperament. Also, it does not lie in the fact that they increase or change the knowledge and beliefs of the listener rather it lays in that they change his temperament and more than likely have an effect upon his actions. To summarize, fundamentally, ethical statements do not possess a dimension of being declarative rather they possess a dimension of being effective.[10](#)

Prescriptivism

The staunchest advocate of this view is Richard Mervyn Ayer. Like the Emotivists he also rejects the fact that ethical statements are declarative and states that if we sometimes see that some ethical rules possess such a dimension then this is simply an accidental matter. In the view of Ayer, basically ethical statements are the practical answers of individuals [for certain problems] and they are not answers to theoretical and epistemological queries. An ethical rule is in reality much like a piece of advice or a suggestion that is given in response to the question: 'What should I do?' Meaning, the basic goal [of such statements] is to guide the listener and not to excite his emotions.

When someone says: 'What should I do?' then he has asked for his emotions to be stimulated rather he has sought to be guided. In brief, in the view of Ayer ethical rules resemble simple commands and are kinds of suggestions that guide others with the difference that they are, in contrast to simple commands, universal.[11](#)

The Viewpoint Of Itibari Concepts

Previously a few things have been said regarding the Conventionalist view and there we say that some of the great scholars understand ethical concepts to depend [in their meaning] upon the goals of

someone who makes them and that they do not have any reality other than the convention and itibar of the individual that makes them. It appears that the logical conclusion of this view with regards to ethical propositions is that (Of course, such great scholars actually accept such a thing) they are inshai in nature and that they do not possess a declarative dimension that expresses something regarding reality. The reason for this is that if even one of the parts (such as the predicate) of a statement be itibari then we cannot say that the statement as a whole possess a real and true extension. Therefore, the relation that exists between a subject and an itibari predicate is one that is [like the predicate] man-made, suppositional and itibari. [12](#)

The principal reason that declarative statements are attributed with truth and falsehood is that by uttering them the speaker seeks to relate something regarding reality. This is while he does not have any such intention when he makes in regards to itibari matters. In other words, when someone like Firdawsi says: 'Two spears, two arms, two brave men, one dragon and one roar of a lion,' he does not wish to express something regarding the external world and that one man is really a lion and one of them a dragon. Or, for example, when someone says: 'One must speak the truth,' or 'Justice is good,' then they do not wish to communicate something regarding an external reality. Therefore, we cannot attribute such statements with truth or falsehood or say that the one who uttered them is speaking the truth or is a liar. Fundamentally speaking, it should be known that it is the statement that seeks to communicate something about reality in which the speaker intends to express something regarding reality that is divided into true and false statements not itibari propositions. The latter are simple statements that the mind makes with the intention of solving some [practical] problems of life and which possess a creative or itibari aspect to them. They do not, however, have anything to do with reality. [13](#)

It is true that even conventional knowledge is attributed with being false in the statements of Allamah Tabataba'i but a careful examination of all of the dimensions of what he has mentioned in this regard shows us that he does mean to say that they are really 'false' such that the meaning of the proposition would not be in accord with external reality. Rather, it is only an apparent falsehood, or, in his words, a 'poetic' falsehood that falls outside the scope of our current discussion. Careful examination of what we shall now relate from him can clarify this reality for us:

اگر دانشمندی که از نقطه نظر واقع بینی- به تمیز مطابقت و عدم مطابقت مفاهیم- و تشخیص صدق و کذب قضایا می‌پردازد- با این مفاهیم و قضایای استعاره‌ای روبرو شود- البته مفردات آنها غیر مطابق با مصادیق و مرکبات- و قضایای آنها را کاذب تشخیص خواهد داد- زیرا مطابق خارجی کلمه شیر- جانور درنده می‌باشد نه انسان- و مطابق واژه ماه کره‌ای است آسمانی نه خوب‌روی زمینی...چنانکه اگر کلمه شیر یا ماه را- بی عنایت مجازی در مورد سنگ- بجای واژه سنگ استعمال کنیم غلط خواهد بود- بی مطابقت- یا اگر بگوئیم- گاهی که آفتاب بالای سر ما می‌باشد شب است- دروغ خواهد بود بی مطابقت- ولی دانشمند مزبور- میان این دو نوع غلط و دروغ فرقی خواهد دید- و آن اینست که غلط و دروغ واقعی اثری ندارد- ولی غلط و دروغ شاعرانه آثار حقیقی واقعی دارد- زیرا تهییج احساسات درونی- و آثار خارجی مترتب با احساسات درونی را- بدنبال خود دارد-.

'If a scholar wishes to objectively distinguish the concurrence of concepts [with reality] and the truth or falsehood of propositions then he will find himself face to face with such metaphorical concepts. Of course, he will find that their individual components do not be in accord with reality and the propositions that are composed of them to be false. This is because, it is a ravenous animal that is the extension of the word 'lion' not any human being and the extension of the word 'moon' is a celestial sphere not any beautiful face...in the same way that it will be false for one to use the word 'lion' or 'moon' for a rock without anything to justify the metaphor (non-concurrence) or if he were to say: 'Sometimes when the sun shines above us it is night,' this will be a lie (non-concurrence); At the same time, the scholar will see a difference between these two types of falsehood and that is that the real falsehood does not have any effect [on anyone] while the poetic lie has real effects [on those that hear them].'¹⁴

Descriptive Theories

We have stated that the stance that we adopt with regards to ethical concepts has a direct effect upon our view on ethical propositions. Based upon this if with regards to ethical concepts someone were to believe in one of the Naturalistic theories or Intuitivistic ones then he must hold that ethical propositions are declarative in nature. In reality there are a number of opinions as to what is the external reality that ethical propositions relate and what is it that they seek to express.

A large number of experts in the field of ethics hold that ethical rules seek to express a reality that exists within the soul of man not something external to him. In other words, these people opine that ethical propositions describe the conditions of the world lies within man's soul not the universe without. In contrast, a group holds that ethical statements express and describe things outside us. In the view of Epicureans the reality that ethical propositions wish to depict is the conditions and realities within the soul of man. For example, someone like Moore who believes that the concept 'good' is a real and objective one and who define other [ethical] concepts based upon that, hold that a proposition such as the following: 'One must speak the truth,' seeks to express an external reality and thus say that it would be capable of being attributed with being true or false. If the statement is in accord with the reality that it seeks to express then it will be true otherwise it will be false.

If truth be told, the Intuitivists agree with such a Naturalistic viewpoint that understands ethical rules to be an expression of the qualities of actions that we perform in the external world while they differ from them in that Intuitivists believe that some of the ethical qualities are incapable of being defined, simple and un-analyzable. In the view of such people, there is no need to take recourse to other propositions in order for us to affirm statements such as the following: 'Telling the truth is good,' and 'Lying is bad.' The reason for this is that [ethical] rules that contain concepts such as good and bad are self-evident ones that are understood via the intuition of the intellect. The intuition of the intellect is the standard by means of which we assess the truth or falsehood of ethical propositions in the view of the Intuitivists.

Intuitivists stress the declarative and qualitative nature of ethical propositions to such an extent that some of their critics have brought up this very matter as a proof that their views are unjustifiable. William

Frankena says the following in this regard:

In sum, it seems that Intuitivism is unjustifiable even if it has not been proven to be wrong...apparently, ethical rules, whether they are natural or not, are not simply descriptive. Ethical propositions advise [others to do certain things], legalize [certain actions], explain what things are conducive to [certain ethical traits] and which are not, and so on and so forth. [15](#)

Our View

In our view there is a real and objective relationship between the deeds of man and the perfection that is desired by him. This is a cause-and-effect type of relationship. By means of our ethical rules we seek to express and describe such an objective relationship. This is clearly the result of the analysis that we presented with regards to ethical concepts. Since we understood concepts such as 'must' and 'must not' to be expressive of the relationship between the deeds of man and the perfection that is desired by him and that concepts such as 'good' and 'bad' are philosophical ones that express the type of relationship that lies between actions and the ultimate perfection of human beings it is only natural that ethical propositions should be declarative and expressive of that same objective reality. Therefore, they should be capable of being attributed with truth or falsehood.

In reality, even though some ethical rules are apparently inshai they are not different from the rules of experimental sciences or mathematics in that they relate or disclose something about the real world to us. Thus, in the same way that the propositions of the experimental sciences express external reality ethical propositions also disclose this objective reality. The only difference between them is the special clauses that ethical rules have. Therefore, we assess the truth and or falsehood of ethical propositions by means of the same standard by means of which we judge the truth and or falsehood of scientific, logical or philosophical propositions. As we have explained elsewhere [16](#), the standard by means of which we can judge the truth and or falsehood of scientific, logical and philosophical propositions is their accordance with or non-accordance with reality. The reality of experimental and scientific propositions is external realities and the reality of philosophical and logical propositions is the mental existence of the reality that they seek to express. This differs in philosophical and logical propositions. For example, in logical propositions the reality [that they seek to express] is a specific level of the mind, while the reality that 'the impossibility of the conjunction of contradictions' seeks to express is a supposed external existence. In this way, the measure by means of which we asses the truth or falsehood of ethical propositions is the effectiveness or futility [of certain actions] in helping us achieve our desired goals. [17](#)

It is useful to remember that it is possible that certain individuals may make a mistake in their assessment of what their ultimate goal or purpose is or that they may falter in their judgment of the ways in which to attain the true goals. This does not, however, in any way negate the objectiveness of the cause-effect relation between the deeds of men and the results that accrue from them in the same way that the difference of opinion [and thus mistakes] of certain scientists does not negate the objectiveness

of science. In other words, if it said that a certain statement is declarative it is not meant by this that it is necessarily true rather it is possible that a declarative statement be true in the same way that it is possible that it be false. There is thus a difference between a false declarative statement and an inshai one. In a false declarative statement, there is also an expression of external reality but this expression is a mistake and does not accord with reality. On the other hand, in inshai statements there, is fundamentally speaking, no expression of objective reality.

The Benefit Of Using Inshai Statements In Ethics

Keeping in mind the view that we have presented regarding the reality of ethical propositions (i.e. that they are declarative in nature) the following question arises: Why is it that in many cases we use an inshai form to express ethical rules? If all ethical concepts are an expression of the cause-effect relationship that exists between the deeds of man and the consequences that accrue from them, why is it that instead of expressing such a relationship directly we use concepts such as 'must' and 'must not' or 'good' and 'bad'?

It seems that simplicity and ease are one of the most important factors in the use of ethical concepts in place of an in-detail explanation of the relationship between actions and their consequences. It is for this reason that instead of saying: 'Telling the truth increases the trust that exists between the members of society, betters their relations and brings about the good-pleasure of God while lying causes its opposite,' in a short but concise statement it is said: 'Telling the truth is good and lying is bad.'

What is more, commands and rules, in contrast to declarative statements, are more effective from an educational/pedagogical point of view. Not only does it cause the student to more firmly believe in the truth of and seriousness of the statements of his teacher but what is more, it strongly motivates individuals to perform ethical works. Now, declarative and descriptive statements do not play such a vital part or if they do so only do so in an insignificant manner.

The Consequences Of Understanding Ethical Statements To Be Inshai

The Need For Someone To Form Them

Since every insha is in need of someone that will form it if we assume that ethical propositions are inshai ones then they too will stand in need of someone that will make them. It is for this reason that those who adhere to non-Descriptive views [in the field of ethics] have sought to discover such an individual. It is this problem which has brought into existence a countless number of non-Descriptive theories. Some, such as those that adhere to the Divine Command Theory, understand God to be the one that makes ethical rules. Others, such as the Socialists surmise that it is the intellect of the society as a whole that forms them. Other groups such as those that adhere to Imperativism, Emotivism and Prescriptivism say

that it is the intelligence and feelings of individuals that create ethical rules. However, if we understand ethical rules to be declarative and expressive of external realities then such discussions will not, principally speaking, be brought up.

The Necessity For Two Faculties Of Knowledge

One of the unacceptable consequences of believing in the inshai nature of ethical statements is that it is necessary in this case to adhere to the fact that there are two faculties of comprehension in man: A faculty that comprehends what exists and what does not (the Theoretical Intellect) and a faculty that comprehends imperatives which are expressed as what must or must not be done (the Practical Intellect). The reason for this is that if we do not understand ethical statements to be expressive of external realities that exist [independent of our will] rather we say that they are inshai in nature and are simply commands then in this case we have created a barrier between 'what is' and 'what must be' in such a way that one faculty of comprehension cannot fathom them both.

It should not be left unsaid that the problem of the Theoretical and Practical Intellect is one of the most important questions of Philosophy and Epistemology and one that was brought up amongst Philosophers and Theologians from times immemorial. Different views existed as regards the definition of and usage of each one of the two terms. Even though not many held that there was a separation between 'what exists' and 'what must be done' they still separated these two faculties from one another for various reasons and intentions. Here, it is fitting that we briefly indicate some of the most important views on this subject and while doing so also explain what our personal view is on the matter.

Great scholars such as Ibn Sina, Bahmanyar, Abul Barakat al Baghdadi, Mulla Sadra (in some of his works) and Abdul Razzaq Lahiji are of the opinion that it is the unconditional responsibility of the Theoretical Intellect to understand universal concepts. This includes the universals that are related to deeds and those actions that stem from man's free-will such as 'the goodness of justice and the evil of oppression' as well as the universals that are theoretical in nature and are related to objective reality. The responsibility of the practical intellect is to think about particular matters in order to practically benefit from them. The obvious conclusion of such a view is that man possesses two faculties within him: One is the faculty that is specifically related to the Universals (the Theoretical Intellect) and the other is the faculty that is related to particulars and that which is practical in nature (the Practical Intellect).

Some other great scholars such as Qutb ad Din Razi in his book the al Muhakimat, the late Naraqhi in his Jama as Sadaat, and ibn Maythum Bahrayni in his Commentary on the Nahj al Balagha have stated the following in their definition of the Practical and Theoretical Intellect:

The Theoretical Intellect is a faculty whose responsibility is unconditionally comprehension. This includes understanding the Universals and the Particulars and those things that are related to action or those that are not so. The Practical Intellect is a practical faculty whose job is to work and it does not comprehend anything whatsoever. In the opinion of this group using the word 'intellect' for the Practical Intellect is an

equivocation of the term otherwise these are two kinds of faculties and there is nothing in common between them other than the fact that they are both faculties of the human soul.

Another view¹⁸ in regards to the definition of the Theoretical and Practical Intellect is that we do not possess, in reality, two separate faculties; rather, under certain circumstances the faculty that we have named as the Theoretical Intellect is called the Practical Intellect. In order to explain, every type of comprehension falls within the jurisdiction of the Theoretical Intellect. This includes both the comprehension of concepts that are related to action and those that are not even particular things such as: 'It is necessary to help this poor person.' Now, if someone were to really help this poor person in the external world then the same faculty that was previously named 'the Theoretical Intellect' will now be called the Practical Intellect. Therefore, the difference between these two is that sometimes the things that the Theoretical Intellect understands are put into practice and at other times they are not. [In the former case the Theoretical Intellect will be named the Practical Intellect].

It appears that before defining the Theoretical and Practical Intellect it is better to define the Intellect itself and that we obtain a better picture of what it is. Following this we can explain the reason as to why it is divided into the Theoretical and Practical Intellect.

Many different definitions can be found for the Intellect in the works of the Muslim Philosophers, Theologians and Usulis several of which are simply rewordings of one another.¹⁹ Some²⁰ have surmised that the Intellect has certain wants, needs, and requirements that are satisfied by the performance of specific actions. Intelligent people praise or scold others for some deeds in order to satisfy the desires of the intellects.

Nonetheless, as some of the great scholars²¹ have explicitly stated the reality of the matter is that the Intellect is a faculty of comprehension whose responsibility is to fathom the Universal [concepts and propositions]. There is no sort of inclination or desire within it²² and principally speaking the faculty that is the Intellect is not of the type that desires anything. If sometimes desire is predicated of it then this is simply a metaphorical predication that does not really befit it. For example, sometimes we may say: 'My eyes find pleasure in looking at certain sights,' even though taking pleasure in some sight is not the action of the eyes. The job of the eyes is to see while taking pleasure is related to the soul. In any case, the Intellect does not entice one to anything nor does it command or prohibit things. It is not the responsibility of the Intellect to command or prohibit [one from things]. The passion that man has in understanding truths drives him to discover and understand them and after he has unraveled complicated problems, he feels a certain personal satisfaction in having done so.

Some philosophers²³ have said that the station of the Intellect is equal to the very degree of the spirit and rational soul of man and therefore, it cannot be counted as one of the specific internal faculties of the soul. However, it seems that this matter is incorrect. The reality of the soul is far above just being able to understand mental concepts. The reality of the soul can be accurately summed up in being able to intuitively witness the existence of things while the comprehension of mental concepts is something

that is performed by means of one of its faculties that lies beneath the lofty station of the human spirit. This faculty is called 'the faculty of the Intellect' in the parlance of philosophy.

It is keeping in mind what we have just stated that we have been lead to believe (like other great scholars such as Farabi²⁴, Mulla Hadi Sabzawari²⁵, Muhaqqiq Isfahani²⁶ and the late Muzaffar²⁷) that the difference between the Theoretical and Practical Intellect lies in the type of things that the Intellect comprehends.²⁸ If the thing that has been comprehended is not practical in nature such as the knowledge of external realities, the understanding of God and His Essential Attributes, etc. then in this case we name the Intellect 'the Theoretical Intellect.' However, if what has been understood is practical in nature [and is something that can be created by the free-will of man] such as the comprehension of the goodness of justice and the evil of oppression, the beauty in trusting in God, the resignation of affairs to Him, the obligation of prayer and the recommended-ness of worshipping God in the morning and the likes of these then in this case the Intellect will be named 'the Practical Intellect.' Therefore, our soul does not possess two independent faculties of comprehension rather there is only one faculty of knowledge within the soul but since that which it comprehends differs from time to time the Intellect itself has been divided into the Theoretical and Practical Intellect.

Again, we would like to stress the fact that if someone were to understand ethical rules to be inshai in nature then in this case since declarative and inshai propositions are two completely distinct types of propositions it would be necessary for him to hold that the soul possesses two divergent faculties of comprehension. The job of one will be the understanding of concepts and propositions that are related to 'what is and what is not' while the responsibility of the other will be to 'what must be done' and the obligations of men. However, keeping in mind the fact that ethical propositions are not declarative in nature and that value concepts are rooted in real and objective concepts such a division will not be necessary. Aside from this, principally speaking, we do not possess two distinct faculties of comprehension. Therefore, it behooves those individuals that adhere to the inshai nature of ethical propositions to come up with a solution to this unacceptable and unintelligent corollary of their viewpoint.

Not Having A Standard For The Intelligibility Of Ethical Rules

The problem of the intelligibility of ethical rules and the examination of the place of the intellect and rational demonstration in ethical matters is one of the most important problems mentioned in the epistemological examination of ethical propositions. This is in fact one of the standards by means of which the strength and weakness of ethical schools of thoughts and views can be accurately assessed. There is no doubting in the fact that if we are not able to, in some way, allow rational demonstration to find its way into ethical matters then we will not be able to, as a result, evaluate ethical schools of thought and viewpoints. In this case it will be impossible for us to weigh their correctness and or incorrectness.

The rational examination of ethical rules will only be possible when there is some sort of logical

connection between [ethical] values and external realities and 'values' return to 'what exists' in some way. The reason for this is that the intellect comprehends realities. However, if we hold that ethical rules are inshai in nature not only is there no connection between these ethical rules what is more no sort of rational demonstration will be able to prove them. The personal inclinations and or temperaments of a group of people cannot be proven [to be correct] with a rational proof. For example, it is not proper to ask: 'What justifies man's liking a flower?' Love, inclination, etc. are not things that can be rationally explained. The only time that some topic can be rationally explained is when is when that topic rests firmly upon a series of cause-and-effect relationships. [29](#)

All non-Descriptive theories are afflicted with this big problem. They do not present a rationally acceptable standard by means of which one can evaluate ethical rules. Principally speaking, if we accept the fact that ethical propositions are inshai in nature then there is no way to examine their truth and or falsehood. It is for this reason that in this case not only will there be no way to evaluate the correctness and or incorrectness of an ethical school of thought but, what is more, there will not be any rational way to justify choosing a particular school of thought. The reason for this is that according to non-Descriptive ethical theories the most that ethical propositions express to us is that the individual that formed them desired to do so. When someone gives the order: 'One must speak the truth,' even though he has not expressed anything regarding external reality he has indirectly showed us that the desire to speak the truth exists within him. In contrast, if someone were to say: 'One must not speak the truth,' then this also indirectly indicates to us that a desire opposite to the one that existed in the previous speaker exists in this speaker. However, in any case there is no way to prove the correctness and or incorrectness of any one of these two views.

It should not be left unsaid that many of those that believe in non-Descriptive schools of thought were themselves aware of this problem. In fact, some of them considered this to be one of the strengths of this viewpoint! Ayer, for example, after stating that if someone makes the following statement: 'Stealing is evil,' then he has not expressed any proposition (in the logical meaning of this term) says the following:

It is possible that someone may oppose me in my view that stealing is evil. Meaning, he does not feel the same emotion that I do with regards to it and that he opposes my ethical feelings on the subject. However, he cannot properly speaking negate my statement. The reason for this is that I have not declared anything regarding the external world by stating that such and such an action is correct or incorrect. I have not even declared anything regarding my mental state. I have only expressed some of my feelings [by making such a statement]. Therefore, it is meaningless to ask which one of us speaks the truth. The reason for this is that neither of us has really uttered a proposition. [30](#)

Allamah Tabataba'i also explicitly states that:

در مورد اعتباریات- نمی‌توان دست توقع بسوی برهان دراز کرد- زیرا مورد جریان برهان حقایق می‌باشد و بس

'It is not possible to take recourse to [logical] demonstration in regards to conventional (itibari) matters. The reason for this is that demonstration is solely relegated for realities.'³¹

In his Nihayah al Hikmah³² he proves the fact that demonstration cannot work with regards to ethical matters in the following way:

فلأنّ - من الواجب في البرهان أن تكون - مقدماتها ضرورية دائمة كلية

'The requisite of demonstration is that its premises be necessary, continuous and universal.'

This is while such conditions only exist in propositions that correspond to the external world. It is for this reason that he understands all of the proofs that have been presented with regard to ethical matters to be popular in nature that do not have any reality behind them other than the consensus of a group of people. It is only natural that if ethical rules are conventional and inshai in nature then neither can they be used as the premises of a demonstration nor can they be proven by the premises of a demonstration. In the words of the Martyr Mutahhari:

ما نمی‌توانیم با دلیلی - که اجزاء آنرا حقایق تشکیل داده‌اند برهان - يك مدعای اعتباری را اثبات کنیم - و نیز نمی‌توانیم با دلیلی که از مقدمات اعتباری تشکیل شده - حقیقتی از حقایق را اثبات کنیم - و هم نمی‌توانیم از مقدمات اعتباری تشکیل برهان داده - يك امر اعتباری نتیجه بگیریم... دو در اعتباریات تقدم شيء بر نفس - و ترجیح بلا مرجح و تقدم معلول بر علت و ... محال نیست - و انتفاء کل با انتفاء جزء - و انتفاء مشروط با انتفاء شرط و ... ضروری نیست - و جعل ماهیت و جعل سببیت و ... نامعقول نیست

'We cannot prove a conventional matter using a proof the premises of which are objective (i.e. a rational demonstration). Also, we cannot use a proof the premises of which are conventional in nature to prove an objective reality. [The reason for this is that] in regards to conventional matters it is not impossible for something to precede itself, for something to come into existence without a cause, and for an effect to precede its cause. Also, it is not necessary [in conventional matters] for a whole to cease to exist if its parts do so, or for something that is conditioned by something to cease to exist if its condition ceases to exist. It is also not irrational to suppose that a quiddity is created and that causality is itself caused.'³³

Some others, who adamantly adhere to the separation of values and reality and hold that ethical rules are absolutely inshai in nature, say the following regarding the place of the intellect and rational demonstration in ethics: 'In no way is it possible to logically prove that something is good or bad in the same way that it is not possible to prove by means of any logical demonstration that some action must be accomplished or not.'

Ethical Propositions Are Capable Of Being Demonstrated

Just as we have previously indicated, we also accept the fact that conventional propositions (from the point of view that they are conventional and keeping aside the fact that they are connected in some way to objective reality) lack the conditions of demonstration. Meaning, they are not necessary, continuous and universal. It is for this reason that they are not able to be used in the premises of any rational demonstration or be proven by rational demonstration. But the crux of the matter is whether ethical propositions are absolutely conventional, arbitrary and insubstantial in nature or they are related to external reality and truth. In the previous discussions we have extensively proven that ethical concepts and propositions are rooted in objective reality and that they have a source from which they are abstracted. Therefore, it is possible to demonstrate the benefit or detriment of ethical rules by relying upon those external realities and also to utilize those ethical propositions in rational demonstrations.³⁴

Also, we agree with the fact that ethical propositions are, in one meaning of the term, popular in nature. However, one must keep in mind the fact that by being popular in nature it is not necessary for that proposition to possess no reality other than the consensus of a group of intelligent people. Principally speaking, this is an incorrect interpretation of the sayings of Muslim logicians and philosophers. A careful examination of the sayings of philosophers such as Farabi³⁵, Ibn Sina³⁶, Bahmanyar³⁷, Katibi³⁸, Khawajah Nasir ud Din Tusi³⁹ and Shaykh Ishraq⁴⁰ adequately shows us that there is no contradiction between a proposition's being popular and its truth or falsehood and thus its capability of being used in a rational demonstration. Although an elaborate examination of each one of their sayings [on the subject] will lengthen our discussion a brief indication, by way of passing, of some of their statements in this regard is beneficial. In his Danish Nameh Ilahi, Ibn Sina states the following regarding popular propositions:

و مثال مشهورات چنان بود ، که گویند: داد واجب است، و دروغ نشاید گفتن و چنان که گویند پیش مردمان ، عورت نباید گشاد ، و کس را بی گناه نباید آزردن. و چنان که گویند: خدای بر هر چیزی قادرست، و هر چیزی را داند: ازین جمله بعضی راست است ، چنان که مثالها پیشین، و لیکن راستیش بحجت درست شو

‘An example of a popular proposition is that someone should say: ‘Justice is obligatory,’ or that ‘Lying is evil,’ or that someone should say: ‘One must not reveal one’s private parts to others,’ and that ‘An innocent person should not be bothered,’ and like if one were to say: ‘God is powerful over all things and He knows everything.’ Amongst these some are true such as the previous examples. However, their truth is something that can be proven through a logical proof.’⁴¹

Also, Khawjah Nasir ud Din Tusi says the following:

مشهورات حقیقی مطلق چنانکه عدل حسن است و ظلم قبیح... مقبول بود بنزدیک همه کس- و بر جمله بنزدیک عقل عملی صحیح باشد- و اما نزدیک عقل نظری بعضی صادق بود- و بعضی کاذب و آنچه صادق بود باشد-

‘Absolute popular propositions, such as the fact that justice is good and that oppression is evil... are accepted by everyone and are all correct in the eyes of the practical intellect. However, some of them are true according to the Theoretical Intellect while others are false. The ones that are true can be proven based upon rational demonstration.’⁴²

Therefore, it is possible to say that ethical propositions can be counted as being popular when viewed in their apparent form but with a certain amount of meditation they can be reverted to certain and evident propositions and in this case, they can be used as the premises of a rational demonstration. The condition for this is that the actual subject of ethical propositions be accurately understood. For example, the proposition: ‘Telling the truth is good,’ in its common form is not demonstratable in nature. The reason for this is that the conclusions of demonstration are not capable of exception even while we come across some instances where telling the truth is not good. For example, if by telling the truth the blood of an innocent person is spilt then it will not be good. However, in reality the subject of such an ethical proposition is a specific type of telling the truth that is in line with the perfection that we seek and that is beneficial to acquiring that perfection; not each and every instance of telling the truth.

In general, it is possible to state that we have two universal major premises for all ethical rules. If any subject should happen to fall under one of them then it will find its true ruling and also partake of the [logical] conditions of a rational demonstration: One of them is the following: ‘Every action that is conducive to our goals is good.’ The second is the following: ‘Everything that detrimental to our goals is bad.’

Understanding Ethical Rules As Relative

Another one of the unacceptable consequences of most non-Descriptive ethical theories is the relativity of ethics. This is because when ethical rules follow the personal inclinations of individuals and the temperaments of society and do not have any foundation in objective and external reality then it is only natural that when these inclinations and temperaments should happen to change their ethical judgments will also change. It is possible that a certain action which is considered good today may be considered bad tomorrow because of social changes that take place. Conversely, it is equally likely that a certain action which is deemed to be bad under certain social and intellectual circumstances be considered to be good when those circumstances change.

Since the relativity of ethics is something that we will argue in detail in the future discussions we will close out our present discussion with a reminder of one important point. That is that one must keep in mind the fact that ethical relativity is not the necessary consequent of some of the non-Descriptive Ethical theories, such as the Divine Command Theory. This is because in the view of the adherents of such a viewpoint the creator of ethical rules is God not the intelligence of an individual or group of

human beings. Now, the Essence and Will of God are not liable to change. Therefore, the goodness of everything that God commands will remain stable and unsusceptible to change. Conversely, everything that He prohibits will always be attributed with being evil unless a new Divine Law should happen to be revealed which should abrogate the previous laws. In any case, unless the rules of one religion are not abrogated it will remain stable and will not change with the changing of the temperaments of individuals and the upheavals of society.

1. Sharh al Shamsiyyah, p. 26–32; Sharh al Manzumah, p. 239–240; al Mantiq, p. 51–54, Jowhar an Nazid, p. 6–7, Asas al Iqtibas, p. 14–16; al Hashiyyah ala Tahzib al Mantiq, p. 24–27
2. Kifayah al Usul, v. 1, p. 16, 98; Nihayah al Dirayah, v. 1, p. 34–35; al Usul ala Nahj al Hadith, p. 26–28, al Talab wa Iradah, p. 14–26; Nihayah al Afkar, v. 1, 2, p. 54–58, al Fawaed, p. 285–287; Manahij al Wusul ila Ilm al Usul, v. 1, p. 92–95.
3. Kifayah al Usul, v. 1, p. 98; Durus fi Ilm al usul, v. 1, p. 90–91, v. 2, p. 73–74.
4. Nihayah al Afkar, v. 1, 2, p. 54–58.
5. Nihayah al Dirayah, v. 1, p. 219–220.
6. Manahij al Wusul ila Ilm al Usul, v. 2, p. 260–261.
7. Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 26.
8. Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 24–32; Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 220–222; Dar Amadi bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 139–140; Moral Vision, p. 24; 'Emotive Theory of Ethics' in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 2, p. 493–496; 'Ethics, Problems of' in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 129; 'Ethics, History of' in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 106–107; 'History of Western Ethics: 12' in the Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 1, p. 538–539.
9. Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 25.
10. Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 30.
11. Falsafah Akhlaq dar Qarn Hazir, p. 39–44; Dar Amadi bar Falsafah Akhlaq, p. 146, 155; 'Ethics, History of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 109–110; 'Ethics, Problems of' in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 129–130.
12. Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 2, p. 166.
13. Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 2, p. 137
14. Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 2, p. 153–155
15. Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 219–220.
16. Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 222–224.
17. Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 231–233.
18. Kawishhaye Aql Nazari, p. 241–242; Kawishhaye Aql Amali, p. 193–201.
19. Sharh al Mustalahat al Falsafiyyah, p. 213–216; Bughyat al Murad, p. 255–274.
20. Al Fawa'id, p. 330.
21. Nihyah al Dirayah, v. 2, p. 311.
22. Akhlaq dar Qur'an, v. 1, p. 207–208.
23. Rasa'el Ikhwan al Safa, v. 3, p. 457; Sharh al Mustalahat al Falsafiyyah, p. 216.
24. Sharh Manzumah Hikmah, p. 310.
25. Sharh Manzumah Hikmah, p. 310.
26. Nihyah al Dirayah, v. 2, 311.
27. Usul al Fiqh, v. 1, p. 205; al Mantiq, v. 1, p. 295–296.
28. Tarjumah wa Sharh Burhan Shifa, v. 1, p. 28.
29. Pishniyazhaye Mudiriyyat Islami, p. 156.
30. Zaban, Haqiqah wa Mantiq, p. 146–147.
31. Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 2, p. 196.
32. Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 259.
33. Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 2, p. 166–167.

- [34.](#) Taliqah ala Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 393, no 383.
- [35.](#) al Mantaqiyyat, v. 1, p. 363–366, 421–424.
- [36.](#) Al Shifa, v. 3, p. 66; al Isharat wa al Tanbihat, v. 1, p. 351; Danish Nameh Alai, p. 52–53.
- [37.](#) Al Tahsil, p. 99.
- [38.](#) Shrah al Shamsiyyah, p. 167.
- [39.](#) Asas al Iqtibas, p. 346–347.
- [40.](#) Majmuah Musanifat Sheikh Ishraq, v. 2, p. 42.
- [41.](#) Danish Namah Ilahi, p. 52; al Shifa, v. 3, p. 66.
- [42.](#) Asas al Iqtibas, p. 346–347.

Chapter 6: Ethical Values

In the beginning it will be beneficial to remind our readers that the term ‘ethical value’ and ‘value concepts’ in the works dealing with ethics have at least two different usages. In the midst of the preceding discussions, we became acquainted with one of these terms and that is the division of the predicates used in ethical propositions into value concepts and concepts that are of an imperative nature. By ‘value concepts’, in this usage of the term, we mean at least those ethical concepts that have a value connotation such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’...in contrast, the meaning of imperative concepts is those concepts that possess a nuance of obligation and responsibility such as the concepts ‘must’ and ‘must not’.

However, sometimes a more general meaning is intended by the term ‘value’ and in this instance it comprises all ethical concepts, both imperative and value concepts. ‘Value concepts’ in this meaning of the term is tantamount to ‘ethical concepts’ and stands in contrast to ‘non-ethical concepts’. It should not be left unsaid that in this second meaning of the term, ‘value’ does not just possess a positive meaning, rather it comprises within itself both positive values and actions that must be and should be accomplished as well as negative values, or, actions that are not becoming and should not be performed.

In the present discussion we mean by ‘value concepts’ and ‘ethical values’ this very meaning of the term. We seek to answer the following question: In what situation will a particular action possess an ethical value and what is the reason for this? In other words, what does it mean when it is said that certain actions possess an ethical value and some others lack ethical value? Principally speaking, where does the ethical value of the actions of men stem from? What is the measure of an ethical and valuable action?

The Importance Of The Discussion On Ethical Values

The discussion about ‘value’ and the comprehension of its essence is one of the problems that drew the

attention of the philosophers of ethics towards itself from times immemorial. All of them attempted to find a standard or measure by means of which to assess and evaluate ethical propositions. Without a doubt, we understand some actions to possess ethical value and we praise or scold its agent [for the performance of it] while some actions we consider to be lacking in any ethical value and therefore, we do not pass any judgment regarding their ethical value. However, the crux of the matter is the difference between the two types of actions. What is the thing that causes some actions to possess a certain sanctity or transcendence while others do not? It is here that divergent viewpoints have come into existence regarding the measure of an ethical action and the explanation of the essence of an ethical value. This is so to such an extent that there are views regarding the basis of an ethical action equal in number to the specialists [in the field of ethics] and the amount of ethical schools of thought.

It should not be left unsaid that the importance of the problem of value is not limited to the Philosophy of Ethics. Rather, this subject also has a special place in the other social and humane sciences. In various sciences, such as Psychology, the Psychology of Sociology, Sociology [itself], Political Science and Economics the different aspects and dimensions of 'value' have been discussed and extensive research regarding this topic has been conducted and matters that are related to it even peripherally. One of the western researchers, by reading 4000 works that have been printed on this subject was able to, in the end, find approximately 140 different definitions for the term 'value' in the sayings of scholars from different sciences.[1](#)

Economic Value

Even though linguistic discussions and analysis is not a one hundred percent way to solve intellectual and philosophical matters an examination of the non-ethical usages of the term 'value' will help us understand the essence and standard of ethical value. In our opinion there is a common element that can be found in the different definitions which have been presented for 'value' in the various sciences. That common factor is the element of 'desirability, benefit and usefulness.' Since an examination of this claim in all of the abovementioned disciplines will take us away from our original goal, we will suffice ourselves with an examination of 'economic value'.

The discussion about the value and standard by means of which one weighs the price of a product is one of the problems that drew the attention of economists towards itself from times immemorial. Many different views have been expressed regarding this matter. Some have tried to define the value of a product by means of the work that is carried out upon it. Some others have included the factor of being 'hard to find.' A still third group has understood economic value to lie in supply and demand. Finally, a fourth group has placed their finger upon the element of desirability, being useful and satisfactory.

It seems that Adam Smith was the first person to discuss value in a logical and extensive manner. First off, he divided economic value into 'use value' and 'exchange value.'[2](#)

He meant by 'use value' or 'natural value' that we evaluate the value of a product based upon its

effectiveness in satisfying one of the needs of human beings.³ When a human being is hungry then food is valuable for him. In other words, food has the capability of satisfying one of his needs. It seems that here value is almost tantamount to desirability and benefit. Man gives value to the things that he wants and to the extent that they are desirable for him and bring him benefit will he understand them to be valuable.

The meaning of 'exchange value' is a relation by means of which one use value is exchanged for another.⁴ The prices that are mentioned in the marketplace for merchandise and products in reality show us the amount of their exchange value. In other words, when they seek to exchange something most human beings understand that it is correct to exchange it for such and such a product or a specific amount of money. If we ponder over the matter properly then the main element in exchange value is the desirability of the product for the buyer and seller. The reason for this is that money is desirable for man and the product that he wished to buy is also desirable for him. If, when compared with one another, the desirability of what he gives and that of what he takes are equal or if the desirability of what he takes is more than that of what he gives then in this case they say that his transaction is valuable. On the other hand, if its desirability is less then what they say this transaction is not 'worthy' of being carried out.

Therefore, the value of a product is distinguished through its desirability. For example, if the desirability of a book be high in the eyes of the reader, then he will be ready to buy it even for a high price but if people show no interest in buying a book, then its 'exchange value' also drops. Let us suppose that there is a thirsty person who is in desperate need of water. He will be ready to pay more than the actual price of the water in order to obtain it. On the other hand, after some of his thirst has been quenched, he will not be ready to spend the same amount of money for water. Therefore, the [economic] value of water depends upon the amount of its desirability.⁵

Of course, keeping in mind the fact that things such as inclination, need and desirability are qualities and that they express conditions in the soul of individuals they are not capable of being weighed in [strictly] quantifiable terms. For example, it is not possible to say that a certain product is one hundred percent desirable and therefore, its price is one hundred dollars. It is for this reason that many discussions have been carried out in the books of Economics regarding the manner of weighing the value of a product the examination of which will keep us from our main goal.

However, the conclusion that can be drawn from the conceptual analysis of economic value is that the standard of value or at least one of the main elements of economic value is its amount of desirability, benefit and usefulness in comparison to other products. In other words, not only is an element of 'comparison' present in the definition of economic value but there is also an aspect of 'desirability' therein as well.

The Elements Of Ethical Value

Desirability

There is no doubting in the fact that there is a difference between ethical and economic value. The value of an ethical action is not because of its exchangeability with something else. Even though it is possible to perform some good deed in order to go to Heaven or to be saved from the fire of Hell this does not mean that the value and goodness of actions such as acting fairly and telling the truth is only because there is something better to be gained in exchange for them. If this was so then, assuming there was nothing to be gained in exchange for them, acting fairly or telling the truth would no longer be valuable and would not be praised by others.

Nevertheless, the same elements that were involved in economic value, i.e. desirability and the comparison of the desirability of two things are also instrumental to some extent in ethical actions. Thus, it is possible to consider them as the elements and basis of an ethical action. Of course, aside from being desirable, an ethical action must also possess other dimensions to itself. In other words, the desirability of ethical actions has certain conditions and clauses and therefore, it is not possible for us to consider desirability to be the unconditional standard for an ethical action. If this was not so then the desirability of food for a hungry man and water for a thirsty individual would also have to be considered to be possessing ethical value.

Free-Will

The Subject of Ethical Values is the action that man performs through his own free-will. It is for this reason that as long as we are compelled [to act] (even if we perform monumental tasks) they will never be attributed with ethical value. Therefore, we must condition the desirability that is mentioned in ethics with a certain clause: 'The desirability that is connected to actions that man performs through his own free-will.'

It should not be left unsaid that in the science of ethics and ethical discussions three things are discussed that are all connected in some way with the free-will of man.[6](#)

1. One of them is related to the actions that man does out of his own free-will; In other words, every action that man performs because he chooses to and through his own free-will.
2. The second is related to the source and cause of those actions. For example, in the science of ethics attributes such as greed and generosity are discussed even though it is possible that in certain circumstances such qualities may not be capable of being acquired [through our own choice]. However, because these qualities manifest themselves in our actions and are related in some way to our freely-willed actions they are ethically evaluated. Thus, it is said: 'Greed is a bad quality,' and 'Generosity is a good quality.'

3. The third matter that is discussed in ethics is the consequences of freely-willed actions. It is possible that by repeating a certain deed some trait or traits may come into existence in [the soul of] man in the form of a deeply rooted quality. Such qualities are also included within the jurisdiction of ethical matters from the point of view that they are the results of a freely-willed action. Therefore, ethical desirability is a desirability that is related to a freely-willed action, its source or its consequences. In any case, it is conditioned with [being related to] behavior that, in the end, is connected to the free-will of man.

Human Desirability

Does every action that man performs through his own free-will, with any sort of desirability that it may have, possess ethical value? There can be no doubt in the fact that the actions that man performs in order to satisfy his natural needs possess no amount of ethical value, although they may be desirable to him. The person that eats food or drinks water in order to satisfy his hunger or thirst or even the mother that caresses her child or feeds it in order to satisfy her motherly feelings will not be praised by others. Nobody says: 'What a good character so and so possesses! He eats his food!' or: 'What a good mother is she! She feeds her child and caresses it!'

Therefore, the desirability of an ethical action also has another condition and that is that it should not have been accomplished in order to satisfy some [base] instinct. However, since the addition of a negative clause to some definition does not clarify it, rather, only adds to its ambiguousness it is better for us to reword this clause in the following way: 'Ethical value is the inclination that the human soul feels [with regards to some action] with the intention to satisfy some instinct that lies above our animalistic instincts.' In other words, it is possible for us to divide the desires of the soul into two categories: One are the desires that exist at the level of animalistic instincts such as the instinct to eat and to protect one's self. These can all be considered to be instincts that are common to both man and animals. The others are instincts and desires that are [spiritually] loftier than these and are solely relegated for man. Such are instincts that propel human beings to the acquisition of knowledge and certain specific actions. Examples of such instincts are courage, generosity and justice. These are in fact the thirst and needs of the higher dimensions of the human soul. Man feels a need to quench them and feels incomplete if they are not satisfied. It seems that such desires and such a thirst is something that has been muffled or still lies in the subconscious of human beings that live as animals do. Such individuals do not pay any attention to these types of needs that lie within them.

According to the clause that we have just added here the desirability of freely-willed actions that are performed in order to satisfy some animalistic instincts cannot be considered to possess any ethical value. On the other hand, the deeds that are related to securing the lofty and humane needs possess such an ethical value. In other words, the human being possesses two personas: A lower persona and a transcendent one. This means that every individual has two levels of existence or two stages of being. In one stage he is an animal like all other animals that possesses instincts that he shares in common with them. On a whole new level altogether he possesses a transcendence that solely belongs to him. The

real persona of man is that lofty and human one. Therefore, the action that corresponds to the spiritual perfection of man is a 'lofty and valuable action' while 'every action that is not related to the loftier dimensions of our soul is an ordinary and base one.'⁷

To a certain extent this clause sheds light upon the reality of ethical value and bestows upon us a more complete understanding of it. Nevertheless, there are still some ambiguities surrounding it. The reason for this is that, first of all, it must be proven that man possesses two types of instincts: human and animal ones. Secondly, it must be proven that his human instincts are more perfect and better than his animal instincts, that the satisfaction of his animal instincts lacks all ethical value and that the satisfaction of his human instincts is ethically valuable. The fact that we possess certain inclinations that other animals do not is not a proof that we are better than them. Aside from this, is it not possible for us to say that the satisfaction of animalistic desires also possesses a certain amount of, although small, value? Meaning, is it not possible for us to divide values in the same way that we divide desires and instincts? Why is it that we relegate ethical value for the satisfaction of desires that are specifically relegated for human beings?

It is for this reason that, in order to complete the discussion and in order to answer these questions, it is necessary for us to add still another clause.

A Prudent And Sensible Choice

Whenever the intellect should happen to show us that the desirability of a certain action is more [than others] and if we were to, [following this], knowingly choose to perform it then in this case our action will have ethical values. To explain: If in one instant only one instinct were to exist in man then he would seek to satisfy that very instinct. In the case where the conditions [necessary for this task] existed and nothing in the external world prevented us from doing so the action [that this instinct sought out] would come to be. However, if there were a number of different inclinations in man and it were impossible for him to satisfy all of them at the same time then in this case such inclinations would get in the way of one another. The inclination whose pull is stronger will naturally draw the attention of the soul towards itself. The question is: What role does man play in this war that wages between the various instincts and inclinations [within him]? Is he simply a casual observer, such that he will follow [blindly] whatever instinct should, due to natural or social reasons, happen to gain the upper hand? Or is it that he can himself choose [what to do] through mental activity and by means of the utilization of his free-will such that it will be possible for him to deny himself the satisfaction of his powerful natural instincts? In the first case, even though he has, out of his own free-will, performed that which his natural instincts desired, he has fallen from the heights of humanity and human values and deadened the special faculties of humanity. In this regard he resembles a wisp of straw that has been thrown in the middle of a whirlpool.⁸

Therefore, man must assess which one of his conflicting instincts are more in line with the guidance of his intelligence and following this choose that very one. A prudent examination will lead him to understand which one of his wants has more desirability for him and then he can choose to perform that. It is only

here that his work possesses ethical value. Of course, what is the measure by means of which he can prefer some of his desires over others is an altogether separate question. One way is to weigh actions by the amount of pleasure that they bestow on us and then choose the one that is most pleasing and long-lasting. Another way is to compare their results and consequences and then choose the one whose results are loftier and more enduring. Still another way is to choose the one that is more conducive to the ultimate perfection of man and which assists him in attaining the proximity to God.

In sum, it appears to us that in order to attain ethical value four elements must be present: 'free-will', 'desirability', 'human desirability', and 'a sensible and prudent choice.' The non-existence of any of these elements is a sign of the non-existence of ethical value.

An Examination Of Some Views Regarding The Standard For Ethical Values

Just as we have point out earlier, each one of the ethical schools of thought has a special view regarding the measure of an ethical action and the essence of ethical value. Here, we will point out some of these viewpoints:

Social Value

From the point of view of Socialism, everything that has been commanded or prohibited by a society or is accepted or rejected by them will possess ethical value. Ethical values are the very social values that society has accepted. Outside the scope of society most if not all of the ethical values become meaningless. Self-sacrifice, patience, forbearance, speaking the truth, justice, love and the likes of these are all values that we have been introduced to by society.[9](#)

In other words, man possesses two personas: an individual persona and a social one. If his social persona is not his only persona then it is at least as real as his individual one and is not a conventional or man-made thing. In relation to these two personas the actions of man also can be divided into two categories: Actions that he performs for his individual persona and those that he does in order to satisfy the desires of his social persona. In this regard those actions that have been suggested to him by his social persona will possess ethical value while any action that has been instigated by his individual persona will not be ethical in nature.[10](#)

It should not be left unsaid that in our discussions on 'Society and History in the Light of the Qur'an' we have extensively criticized this view and weighed it by the traditions of the Prophet and His Holy Family and reason. There we have proven that not only are the proofs that the adherents of this view present to substantiate their claim insufficient but rather there are also numerous rational and religious proofs that demonstrate the incorrectness of this belief. In order to gain a better acquaintance with these objections one can refer to those discussions.[11](#)

Personal Or Group Profit

In the opinion of the Epicureans, the basis of ethical value is pleasure and personal good. Ethical value is nothing other than pleasure and individual good. Consequently, the thing that grants us more pleasure and whose pleasure is more enduring and serves our personal interest more will have more ethical value.

In contrast, the Profitivists hold that it is the profit or loss that accrues to people in general or to a specific group that makes an action more ethical and increases its value although it may lead to some personal loss [for an individual]. It seems as though the personal interests of an individual is somehow tied up with that of society and thus their separation is not something that can be easily accomplished. We will discuss these schools of thought in more detail in the second part of this book and therein we will demonstrate their imperfections and weaknesses. [12](#)

In the examination of the Islamic Ethical School of Thought it will become clearer that although, in reality, profit and benefit is always alongside that thing which is the standard of ethical value, profit cannot in and of itself be considered to be what makes something valuable.

The Meaning Of ‘Must’ And ‘Must Not’

Some people have surmised that ethical value, and ethics in general, can be summed up in the meaning of ‘must’ and ‘must not’ and therefore, every ethical value in reality represents an ethical command or imperative. According to this view, ethical value exists anywhere that ‘must’ and ‘must not’ exist. The following has been said regarding the merits of this viewpoint: Transforming ethical values into the form of commands (as we have done) and returning ethics to a collection of commands and understanding value propositions to be imperative in nature is effective in clarifying some ambiguous points and solving many philosophical puzzles.

In our view, this viewpoint is neither inclusive nor exclusive. [13](#) Neither is it true that ethical value is absent wherever ‘must’ and ‘must not’ are absent nor is it true that wherever these two exist ethical value also exist.

The non-inclusiveness of this opinion lies in the fact that, just as we have previously explained, in the propositions used in the natural sciences, mathematics and the conventional disciplines concepts such as ‘must’ and ‘must not’ are frequently used even though no one will consider those sciences or those of their propositions that use such concepts as possessing ethical value. It is for this reason that the following statement, which is often uttered, will be false: Scientific laws are always universal and logical propositions that end with ‘exists’ or ‘does not exist’... [While] ethical laws are laws that evaluate things that [do not] exist in the external world or which speak about what ‘must or must not be done’ in a general or particular way. In other words, such a distinction between science and ethics or knowledge and value is in no way in accordance with reality.

It is not true to say that wherever we see 'must' and 'must not' we should understand it to be related to ethical values while wherever there is talk of 'exists' or 'does not exist' or the beings in the external world that should be related to science. When it is stated in the natural sciences that: 'In order to obtain water it is necessary to (i.e. one must) combine the elements hydrogen and oxygen in a specific way' have we expressed an ethical value or law? When a mathematician says the following: 'In order to solve such and such a mathematical problem it is necessary to (i.e. one must) perform a certain equation' has he left the boundaries of science and description and spoken about virtue and ethical value? In the purely conventional sciences such as grammar where it is said: 'In Arabic, in order to form a sentence, one must place the verb in front of the agent of the verb' has an ethical rule been decreed?

Even with all of the common traits that Ethics and Law possess we still cannot say that the commands and prohibitions of Law, whether they be related to the general rule of Law or the particular laws of a government, possess ethical value in and of themselves. Although, it seems possible for us to situate them into Ethics in some way and thus form an ethical system that comprises the propositions of the Law. However, it should be kept in mind that in this case the ethical value of laws and legal rulings are related to their ethical dimension not their legal one.

Another objection that can be leveled at this view is that it is not exclusive. The reason for this is that value concepts are not limited to obligations and prohibitions. Many concepts such as: good, bad, correct and incorrect are often mentioned in Ethics that hold value meanings and are in no way kinds of obligations or prohibitions.

In summary, such an interpretation of ethical values lacks the conditions necessary for a precise definition [for ethical value] and, thus, is unacceptable. It is not possible for one to divide concepts into two groups and then say that one group is of the type of 'what is' while the other group is of the type of 'what must or must not be done' and then state the ethical concepts are of the second group.

The Intellectual Desirability Of An Action That Stems From Free-Will

Another view has drawn the attention of many philosophers and the experts on the Philosophy of Ethics [to itself] and that is that the standard for ethics and ethical value is the intellectual desirability of actions that stem from our free-will. Every action that is affirmed and accepted by the intellect and which the intellect commands us to perform possess ethical value while every action that is sought out by the natural instincts and inclinations lacks ethical value. [14](#)

In order to explain: Man is a being that is composed of three principal faculties: Lust, Anger and the Intellect. [15](#) It is only natural that each one of these faculties has their own needs and requirements. Nonetheless, the basis of ethics and ethical value is that the intellect should be what rules over the being of man in such a way that it should satisfy the needs of the other faculties without going to an extreme in

this regard and unless this should lead to a setback on his road to [spiritual] felicity. The intellect should guide these faculties to the middle point of justice and balance.

By doing so another faculty comes into existence in man by the name of 'justice'. In this manner the principles of ethics will be acquired: chastity, courage, wisdom and justice. In any case, any action that is not performed in order to satisfy the desires of the faculties of lust and anger, rather, is performed because of the desirability and benefit that the intellect sees in it will be an ethical deed. In other words, any action that is commanded or prohibited by the intellect and whose goal is to satisfy the needs and requirements of this faculty will possess ethical value. On the other hand, if the goal behind an action is the satisfaction of the unruly desires of the faculties of lust and anger then that action will not be ethical or possess ethical value.

From one point of view, this perspective has plus points and merits that do not exist in the other ones or that do, but in a lesser way. This is the separation of a lofty action or value from an instinctive and normal one. Just as we have previously stated in explaining our own personal view in the beginning of this chapter, we also accept the fact that a deed will only possess ethical value and be included in the jurisdiction of ethics when it is not simply performed in order to satisfy the animalistic tendencies and natural inclinations. Rather, it should be in line with the transcendent and sacred dimension of man. Also, the emphasis of this view upon the intellectual desirability of an ethical action is a point that does not exist in the others and we have previously stated that one of the principal elements of ethical value is that it is intellectual in nature.

However, leaving aside the fact of whether or not this view is justifiable or not [in and of itself], it seems that the premises and fundamental postulates upon which it rests are shaky. The reason for this is that it can apparently be gathered from what they say that they consider the intellect to also possess needs and requirements that are satisfied by the performance of certain actions!

These individuals relate commands and prohibitions to the intellect even while, in our opinion, the intellect does not have the power to command or prohibit, as a [cognitive] faculty [of the soul]. As we have extensively explained in the preceding chapter, we believe that the intellect does not possess any sort of inclination or desire and, principally speaking, the intellect is not an instinct or inclination.

The intellect does not command or decree nor does it feel the hunger or thirst for something. It does not take pleasure in anything. The sole responsibility of the intellect is to comprehend the universals and to guide and clarify matters. The intellect resembles [in this matter] a lamp that distinguishes the way from the pitfalls that lie on it without it having any inclination towards one of the two sides. Therefore, it is not possible for us to consider the measure for ethical value to be the acceptance of the intellect or intellectual desirability of a deed. Unless we interpret this to mean what we stated in explanation of our own personal view which is that the standard of the ethical value of an action is that the intellect distinguishes the fact that the action rationally deserves to be desired and then man chooses this action out of his own free-will.

- [1.](#) 'Chisti Arzish', John Von Dis and Eleanor Scarborough, in Qabasat, no 13, p. 114.
- [2.](#) Tarikh Aqaed Iqtisadi, v. 1, p. 114–123 and Tarikh Aqaed Iqtisadi, Louis Budon, p. 86.
- [3.](#) Nizamhaye Iqtisadi, p. 112.
- [4.](#) Nizamhaye Iqtisadi, p. 113.
- [5.](#) Pishniyazhaye Mudiriyyat Islami, p. 150–151.
- [6.](#) Pishniyazhaye Mudiriyyat Islami, p. 152–153; Akhlaq dar Qur'an, v. 1, p. 21–25, 47–50, v. 2, p. 90–95.
- [7.](#) Naqdi bar Marxism, p. 207–209.
- [8.](#) Khud Shinasi Baraye Khud Sazi, p. 102–105.
- [9.](#) Falsafah wa Jamea Shinasi, p. 51, 72.
- [10.](#) Naqdi bar Marxism, p. 205, 207.
- [11.](#) Jamea wa Tarikh az Didgah Qur'an, p. 73–109.
- [12.](#) Falsafah Akhlaq, Mutahhari, p. 311–323.
- [13.](#) Taliqah ala Nihayah al Hikmah, p. 391–392, no 382.
- [14.](#) Al Fawaed, p. 320.
- [15.](#) Al Mizan, v. 1, p. 370–373; Sharh ibn Maythum ala Meah Kalimah li Amir al Mominin, p. 19–20.

Chapter 7: Ethical Responsibility

Another one of the concepts that has long drawn the attention of the philosophers of ethics towards itself is the concept of 'ethical responsibility'. We will also attempt to point out some of the dimensions of this problem in this chapter and to answer some of the [fundamental] questions that have been mentioned regarding this topic. Some of those problems are the following: What is the meaning of responsibility? Does being responsible mean that one deserves praise and or scorn? Is responsibility related directly to the action itself or does it also include the indirect consequences of the action? Is responsibility simply a prospective concept or a retrospective one as well? Is responsibility a quality that is related to individuals or can societies, groups, organizations, companies and the likes of these also be attributed with it? Principally speaking, under what circumstances is someone responsible for his actions? If someone is forced to do something or does so unknowingly, is he ethically responsible for his action? If someone is afflicted with psychological compulsion (such as the individual that is afflicted with kleptomania) will he be ethically responsible for his deeds? Finally, keeping in mind the fact that responsibility only has meaning when there is someone to whom we must answer it should be asked as to who we are responsible to answer to?

The Importance Of The Discussion Of Responsibility

The topic of responsibility is one of the most important and valuable philosophical, religious, ethical and legal problems. From the time of the ancient Greeks until now philosophers were constantly attempting to explain, in different ways, the responsibility of man and its conditions and requirements. Of course, some of these philosophers of ethics (who believed that the foundation of an ethical rule is the command and imperative) felt more secure in relation to this question and it is for this reason that we see that

amongst the later philosophers of ethics, Emanuel Kant and following him the Neo-Kantians placed especial emphasis on this concept. Kant held that the foundation of ethical rules is the imperative and responsibility and since man is ordered by the intellect [to perform certain tasks] it is only natural that he is responsible in relation to its commands.

The importance of the problem of responsibility will become clearer when we understand its relation to philosophy, theology and some of the natural sciences. From one point of view the discussion on responsibility is tied up with some of the discussions in philosophy such as causality and the free-will/predestination debate. In other words, [it is tied up with] discussions that has drawn the attention of many great thinkers of this world towards itself from the time of the formation of philosophical thought up till the present age. From another point of view, it is also connected with important theological discussions such as ‘the absolute knowledge of God’ and the most complicated discussion that is ‘the divine decree and measurement.’

Also, in the present era with the striking advancement of social sciences, anthropology, psychology, etc new discussions on this topic have been put forth that have increased its complexity and importance. Some of the experts in the field of the humanities have in some way tried to negate free-will from man by taking recourse to the social, environmental, psychological, biological factors that influence the behavior of man. They have claimed that men cannot be considered to be truly free agents rather they resemble the parts of a complicated machine. Their actions are completely influenced by social and biological factors.¹ The necessary corollary of this claim is that we cannot hold any human being ethically responsible for his or her actions. Therefore, even though it is possible for us, for certain [practical] reasons, to legally sentence criminals and throw them in jail from the point of view of ethics we can never hold them responsible for the crimes that they have committed.²

The Meaning Of Responsibility

Some writers, such as F.H. Bradley, are of the opinion that ‘responsibility’ means the same thing as ‘making one’s self accountable for something.’³ Based upon this view, when it is said that Zayd is ethically responsible for such and such an action then it is as if we have said that he can ethically be taken to account for it.

It is true that in most cases the discussions that are related to responsibility lead to ones that are related to the capability of being held accountable. At the same time however, being responsible for something and being susceptible to being taken to account for something do not mean [exactly] the same thing. At the most, it is possible to say that ‘being susceptible to being taken to account for something’ is one of the necessary consequents of being responsible for it. When someone acts upon what he is responsible for then contrary to this claim he will be praised and rewarded [for what he has done]. In other words, it is possible to say that the discussions on [ethical] responsibility are the foundations of the discussions related to [ethical] praise and scorn and are connected to it.⁴

In any case, it is possible to say that responsibility and being responsible [for something] means asking someone to do something and it is used in cases where the one asking can follow up on what he asked from the one whom he has asked. He can hold the one whom he has asked answerable for his behavior which either conforms to what he has asked for or does not. The corollary of this is that the one responsible will be praised or scorned and in cases rewarded or punished corresponding to the kind of behavior that he has displayed. In conclusion, responsibility is only reasonable when the one who has been asked to do something is obligated to do what he has been asked to do. It is for this reason that it has been said that the concept of 'responsibility' is only meaningful in relation to the carrying out of and or forgoing of one's duties. If the one responsible performs his duties, then he will be praised and often rewarded while he will be scorned and often punished if he shrinks away from his duties.

It should not be left unsaid that the discussion on ethical responsibility is not simply limited to the actions that man performs directly rather it cannot also be brought up with regards to the indirect consequences that may not have been intended [by the agent].⁵ They can even be brought up with regards to the internal actions [that man performs within himself] that are related to the acquisition, strengthening or weakening of the psychological distinctions of man. For example, it can be asked: 'Is the person who is inclined to oppression (but does not oppress anyone) responsible [for this inclination] or not?' It should also be known that the jurisdiction of responsibility is not limited to the effects of one's actions that may come about in the future; rather, it also includes those effects that existed in the past.⁶

It is for this reason that, from one point of view, responsibility can be divided into two categories: Responsibility that is related to the past and one that is related to the future. The responsibility that is related to the past is the one that the agent comes face to face with after he has performed the action. Being responsible for the future means to have some sort of an obligation [with regards to an action] that secures the existence of that action in the external world. When it is said: 'The lifeguard is responsible for the safety of the swimmers,' it is more than anything related to responsibility for the future.

This means that the thing that the lifeguard is responsible for (i.e. the safety of the swimmers) has not come about as of yet and will come to pass in the future (i.e. when people come and swim in his presence). On the other hand, when it is said: 'The lifeguard is responsible for the life of such and such a swimmer,' this expresses the responsibility that is related to the past. The reason for this is that 'the death of the swimmer' is something that has already taken place and the responsibility of the lifeguard in this matter is because he had not performed his duty properly [at the time when he should have].

Therefore, responsibility that is related to the past is with regards to those actions that an individual has performed or not performed while responsibility with regards to the future is related to those obligations that an individual must perform in the future. It is possible to say that because responsibility has two stages: 'want' and 'taking into account' it correspondingly can be divided into two categories: the stage of 'want' is related to the responsibility that is connected to the future while the stage of 'taking into account' is related to the responsibility that is related to the past.

The Responsibility Of An Individual Or Group

Some believe that responsibility is not solely relegated for each and every individual; rather, groups, organizations and even companies can be understood to be responsible.⁷ In other words, it is possible to hold a specific group or organization responsible [for some specific action] leaving aside its members and affiliates. For example, when it is said that: ‘The educational system of the country is responsible to train experts [in different fields],’ or ‘That company is responsible to import beautiful products,’ or ‘The government is responsible to protect the safety of the society,’ then in all of these cases responsibility has been related to companies and organizations and we have considered them responsible ‘as a whole’. It is for this reason that the praise or scorn that is the result of carrying out one’s obligation or not fulfilling it will be directed towards the whole society not each one of its individual members. It is for this reason that it is possible to scorn an individual member of the government even while we praise the government as a whole for carrying out its responsibilities.

With regards to this view, it must be said: If they mean by this that companies and organizations possess an existence independent of their individual members such that they can be responsible in some way without taking into account their members and can Therefore, be held responsible [for their actions] then this is something incorrect and unacceptable. The reason for this is that, principally speaking, praise and scorn follow responsibility which follows obligation which follows free-will. Free-will is a distinction of man and therefore, we can in no way believe that such companies and organizations have free-will. Therefore, saying that they are responsible for their actions is something metaphorical and lacks a philosophical and rational basis.⁸ However, if what they mean by this is that some, or rather, most of the ethical and legal responsibility of individuals forms inside such organizations and companies and is a result of their having become members of such associations then this is something correct and justifiable. Because he has a job that is related to an organization (i.e. a school) a teacher has some special responsibilities and because a doctor has a job that is related to society as a whole he has distinct obligations and thus responsibilities. A manager also has different responsibilities from the workers that work under him. However, this is something different from believing that an organization qua organization (i.e. without taking into consideration its members) is responsible [for its actions].

Therefore, when an organization is praised for its actions then in reality this means that all of its members have fulfilled the individual responsibilities that they were burdened with. Conversely, if an organization is scorned because some of its members have not acted properly and thus the organization was not able to perform its duties as intended, then even though apparently the organization as a whole is scolded in reality this scorn is directed towards those individuals that have not carried out their responsibilities. Ethically we cannot scold a worker that has properly performed his duties because of the unbecoming actions of the ‘whole’. The worker that understands his responsibility properly, ethically speaking, is not responsible in any way for the unbecoming actions of other workers.

The Conditions Of Ethical Responsibility

The explanation of the necessary and sufficient conditions for responsibility is something that has long drawn the attention of philosophers towards itself and in this regard lengthy discussions have been carried out. In general it is possible to say that a human being is only ethically responsible for an action or event when first of all he has the power to perform it, secondly when he does so knowingly and third when he performs it out of his own free-will.⁹ It is possible to say that all of the philosophers and thinkers that have discussed this matter have accepted these conditions and that if there is any difference of opinion in this regard it is in relation to the interpretation and delineation of the boundaries of these conditions. Of course, we do not intend to say that everyone has accepted the existence of these conditions and that they affirm the fact that man is ethically responsible [for his actions]. Rather, as we will see in the forthcoming discussions some emphasize the fact that free-will is a condition for ethical responsibility and at the same time believe that man is forced to act the way he does and therefore, is not ethically responsible for his actions. An explanation of each one of the three conditions of ethical responsibility will follow:

Power And Ability

One of the necessary conditions for ethical responsibility is the power to perform one's obligations. Therefore, if the obligation lies outside the jurisdiction of one's power it is only natural that one cannot ethically be held responsible for that. It is for this reason that we believe that it is bad for someone to be burdened with a task that he cannot do and that the Most-Wise God does not ask human beings to do something that lies outside the boundaries of their abilities. 'God does not oblige a soul with something unless he is able to do it.'

Knowledge And Awareness

The second condition for responsibility is that man knows what he has been obliged with and understands that he is responsible for it.¹⁰ Therefore, someone can be held ethically accountable for some action and thus he can be praised or scolded with regards to it if, aside from being capable of doing it, he is aware of its correctness or incorrectness.¹¹ The Holy Qur'an says the following in this regard:

إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ نَبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا

***'Verily we created man from a mixed seed so that we may try him. Therefore, [for this reason] we gave him hearing and sight.'* (76:2).**

In this verse, after mentioning the creation of man from a mixed sperm God points out the purpose of his

creation, in other words, testing. God has created man in such a way that he possesses different inclinations and desires that often contradict one another and in this way, He has laid the ground for his testing and responsibility. Thereafter, God says that we gave him the power to understand and created him with sight and the power to hear. It is by these means that he can understand his obligations and responsibilities and may also choose one out of the many different and contradictory ways [to perform these responsibilities].

Of course, in this regard God has not limited Himself to the ordinary means of cognition rather, through the delegation of the prophets and revelation God has delineated the proper manner of living for human beings. In this way the ground has been completely laid for the testing of and responsibility of man and the road to making excuses has been closed.

In any case, having awareness with regards to the thing that one is obliged with is another one of the conditions of responsibility. It is for this reason that we do not ethically evaluate the actions of a small child. If we do encourage him or scold him then this is simply to teach him and has no connection whatsoever with ethical responsibility. A child is free to break the window of his neighbor's home with a rock or to refrain from doing so. Now, if he should happen to choose the wrong thing then, even though we may scold him it is clear that this scolding is simply meant to teach him [that this action is wrong] and does not mean that we intend to scold him for not performing his ethical responsibility in this matter. This is because he lacks the knowledge and awareness of the ethical dimensions of his actions.

Free-Will And Independent Choice

Another one of the fundamental conditions of ethical responsibility is the existence of free-will and independent choice. Aristotle said:

‘The condition for responsibility, and [thus] being capable of being scorned to praised, is an independent choice. [12](#) Therefore, every action that is the effect of being forced to do it is not free-willed and as a result the individual has no responsibility with regards to it.’ [13](#)

Forced actions, in the view of Aristotle, are those actions whose causes lie outside our free-will. For example, a wind may take a boat here and there or another power may cause it to move in another direction. [14](#)

In order to gain a clearer picture of this condition it is necessary to first point out some of the principal meanings of free-will. [15](#) Thereafter, we can understand the meaning of the free-will that is a condition of ethical responsibility.

1. In contrast to Idhtirar: Sometimes the word ikhtiyar is used in opposition to idhtirar. For example, it is said: Eating the dead flesh of an animal that has not been ritually slaughtered is prohibited if one does so freely but under idhtirari conditions it is permissible. This means that eating such a meat is permissible under conditions where not doing so would lead to great harm or to the destruction of one's

self.

2. In contrast to Ikrah: Ikrah is true in instances where man is threatened with some danger and because of such external threats he does something that he would not have done in conditions where was free.

3. In contrast to Jabr: In many instances ikhtiyar is used in a very broad and general sense and means that the agent of the action performs an action only because he is inclined to do so without being under the pressure of some other factor. In contrast a jabri action is one in which the free-will and independent choice does not play any role rather its existence was due to the pressure of internal or external factors.

After having gained a cursory acquaintance with the three main meanings of ikhtiyar now the time has come for us to examine what is meant by the ikhtiyar that is mentioned as one of the conditions of responsibility? As we have previously indicated, the thing that grants [ethical] value to the actions of man and thus makes him the object of praise or scorn is that he freely chooses from amongst the various possible actions that lay before him. God has created man in such a way that there are different, and often conflicting, inclinations within him that oppose one another in practice. Each one of these inclinations pulls him towards itself.

However, it is not true to say that every power that is stronger will have a certain effect upon his behavior and will forcefully pull him towards itself like a piece of iron in between to magnets that is pulled unwillingly towards the one whose attraction is stronger. Rather, men can with the power of free-will and their independent choice stand up against the flood of such inclinations and desires. Man has a power by means of which he can gain the upper hand over his unruly animalistic instincts. It is for this reason that we can hold him responsible for his actions and their consequences and take him to account for them.

Therefore, the meaning of ikhtiyar and independent choice in this discussion is that man has the power to choose. It is for this reason that if he should perform some action under the duress of others, he will not be responsible for it.

However, does man actually possess such a power of free-will and independent choice? Can man gain the upper hand over the pressure of the powers that exist around him and within his soul as well as genetic factors or is he the slave of such visible and hidden powers?

In our opinion, 'the power of choice and free-will is one of the most definite things that have been used to introduce man.'¹⁶ Every human being fathoms this intuitively and with a knowledge that is incapable of being incorrect.

این کہ می گوی این کنم یا آن کنم این دلیل اختیار است ای صنم

That you say, 'Should I do this or that?'

Is itself a proof for your free–will, Oh dear!

Without a little amount of self–introspection everyone can understand that he can freely speak or stay quiet, move his hand or keep it still and eat or remain hungry.

We remain in doubt with regards to two tasks

How can this doubt exist if we were not free?

How could this ‘Should I do this or that?’ be

If both of his hands were tied?

This doubt would not exist in his head:

‘Should I go into the ocean or should I jump up?’

So, this doubt should have some power [behind it]

If not then it would be hilarious

However, the ones that deny free–will have taken recourse to numerous proofs in order to establish the existence of determination. In order to complete the present discussion, it is fitting that we examine and criticize some of the most important doubts of the determinists.

A Critique And Examination Of The Proofs Of The Determinists

In general, it is possible to say that the Determinists, from whatever group they may be, hold that the actions that stem from man are surrounded by conditions and circumstances that make it impossible for him to do anything else and that the will of man does not play any role in the existence or non–existence of such actions. The advocates of determinism have presented numerous proofs to substantiate their claim and in other terms they have tried to prove their claim from different angles. In this section we will examine three of the most important proofs of the Determinists.

Philosophical Determinism

On the basis of the philosophical principle: ‘Until something does not become necessary it does not come into existence’ the condition for [the existence] every possible being is that it should reach the boundaries of necessity. Since the actions of men are also possible beings if they want to come into existence, it is necessary for them to first become necessary. In other words, their complete cause should come into existence. It is only natural that if the complete cause of something should come into existence it will become necessary. Therefore, there remains no room for the free–will of man and thus it is not possible for us to consider him ethically responsible for his actions.

Another explanation for this proof is popular amongst some western philosophers and it goes as follows: [17](#)

1. If determination be true then it would entail that we have accepted causality as a general rule and in

this case, no one will be free with regards to anything. The reason for this is that if we suppose that the complete cause of something has come into existence then the occurrence of the effect is necessary. This would entail that the free-will and independent choice of the agent has no way to prevent it from coming to be.

2. If determination be false (in other words, if we do not accept the general law of causality) then in this case as well no one will be free with regards to anything. The reason for this is that in this case, phenomena will come into being without any cause and haphazardly and thus it will have no relation whatsoever with the free-will of man.

3. Determinism is either correct or incorrect.

4. We can only hold someone ethically responsible for their actions when they were free to perform them.

Conclusion: No human being is ethically responsible for any of their actions or the consequences that such actions might entail.

Therefore, assuming that we have accepted the general law of causality the free-will and independent choice of man are nothing more than figments of the imagination. Since we do not fathom the real causes of our choices, we surmise that we have chosen them through our own free-will. This resembles the man who is taken in his sleep into another room only to have the door of the room locked on him. However, after he wakes up, he chooses to remain in the room. This is a choice that he has really made and he could have chosen to leave the room [in his mind]. This is while we know that he has not really chosen anything. The reason for this is that there is only one alternative that lies ahead of him. It is his ignorance and unawareness of his real situation that has caused him to surmise that he has freely chosen to remain in the room. The exact same thing can be said of our ethical choices keeping the general law of causality in mind. When we choose to perform action 'a' and forego action 'b' then we surmise that we are free to do so even though we are not. The reason for this is that our actions are determined by their [own proper] causes. In other words, they are the effects of the causes that precede them. Therefore, we cannot hold man ethically responsible for his actions. [18](#)

Spinoza said:

'Since man is aware of his desires and inclinations but is unaware of their causes, and he cannot even guess what they are, he thinks that he is free.' [19](#)

'It is for this reason that the child thinks that it seeks out its mother's milk and the angry young boy believes that he seeks out revenge through his own free-will and the coward thinks that he chooses to flee and the drunk man believes that he himself says things that he would not have, were he sober. In this way the crazy person, the angry boy and the likes of them think that they speak by the freely-willed command of their souls. This is while, in reality, they cannot hinder the intentions that drive them towards speaking. Experience and reason have taught us that human beings only believe that they are free

because they are aware of their actions but unaware of the causes of those actions.'[20](#)

This proof has been criticized from many different angles by the philosophers of ethics.[21](#) The simplest answer that can be given to it is that in regards to man free-will and choice is the last part of the complete cause of his deeds. Therefore, no complete cause will come into existence unless the will and choice of man are not added to the other parts of the complete cause and thus the action will not be in this case necessary. And after man wills to perform some action, it is meaningless to assume that he must be free to perform the action or forgo it. Therefore, if the advocates of this proof consider the will of man to be one of the constituents of the complete cause, then in this case the action is accomplished through the free-will of man. If, on the other hand, they do not assume that this is so and say that the complete cause of this action exists then they are mistaken.

'The reason for this is that as long as the choice of man does not exist the complete cause will also not exist. Therefore, the action that man performs freely also obtains necessity through its cause only this is a necessity that it has obtained through an agent that has free-will. In other words, it is the free-agent that grants necessity to its action. Hence, it is not necessary for him to become overpowered by his action.'

In other words, these individuals have surmised that believing in causality is synonymous with the belief in determination. This is while these two do not necessitate on another. Meaning, it is possible to believe in the general law of causation and say that every effect becomes necessary through its complete cause and at the same time to accept the fact that man is free in his actions and to state that the choice of man is one of the elements of this complete cause and that it in relation to actions that man chooses to perform his choice is what bestows necessity to them.[22](#)

Natural Determinism

Another set of proofs and doubts of the determinists can be subsumed and criticized under the universal heading: 'Natural Determinism'. The determinists are of the opinion that the laws of Nature dictate that man perform certain actions and that they place man on a path in which he can only perform those specific actions. In this situation there is no room for free-will and independent choice in the precise meaning of these terms. Environmental factors instigate certain inclinations and motives in man. Also, based upon the laws of heredity man unwillingly inherits certain traits from his ancestors. Therefore, when men choose to perform a certain action, even though they have apparently freely chosen to do so, in reality this choice is the outcome of a series of natural, environmental, genetic and hereditary factors. Therefore, there remains no room for independent choice and thus ethical responsibility.

In his famous defense of two young criminals Clarence Darrow, an American lawyer, was able to prove their innocence by taking recourse to natural determinism.[23](#) He was of the opinion that there is no such thing as free-will and independent choice and that all of the actions of man are formed on the basis of previous causes and factors. Man is not free to choose his father, mother, brother and sister; he is not

free to choose how he will be educated and raised in the beginning of his life. These are in fact the things that form the structure of what will be his behavior. He is not free to choose the genes by means of which he inherits the ethical characteristics of his father. All of these are things that are forcefully given to him. Consequently, he is not responsible for his actions. If there be some responsibility then it is related to a time before he was, somewhere in his countless ancestors or in his environment.

Behaviorists such as Watson and his followers hold that it is possible to predict and control the behavior of men. This is because all of his behavior (including the ethical choices he makes) is controlled by means of a series of causes that can, in principle, be distinguished. Therefore, by understanding those causes it is possible to predict the behavior of every individual in relation to his specific circumstances and thus to control him in this way. Watson was of the belief that there are two defining factors that help shape the behavior of men: One of them is inheritance and the other is the environment. Therefore, by changing the environment in which man lives his behavior is sure to change as well. In one of his books, he writes:

‘Give me a few well-behaved and healthy children so that I may raise them in my own special world and I promise you that I can educate whichever one I may happen to choose by chance the way I want. I can make him a doctor, lawyer, artist, manager, businessman, or even a beggar or a thief. This is leaving aside their propensities, inclinations, capabilities, tastes and race.’²⁴

The daily spread of Bio-Medicine and Genetic-Engineering as well as Eugenics and the striking progress that has been made in this field after the discovery of DNA shows us the pivotal role that genes and heredity play in the formation of man’s outward and inner person.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that no human being can be held ethically responsible for his actions. He cannot be praised for his good deeds or scorned for his evil deeds even though, from the point of view of the law, it is better to take punishments into consideration for evil people so that society may be safe from their malevolence.

The answer to these claims is very clear. In reality such individuals have made the fallacy of ‘Misplaced Concreteness’. They have taken one of or some of the factors that help form man’s behavior and have assumed that they are the only factors therein. In order to explain: We also accept the role of environmental, natural, genetic and hereditary factors in the formation of man’s behavior. A young person who lives in an environment full of spirituality can more readily perform his religious duties. The individual that has been raised in a religious family is more inclined to religious values. However, it must not be forgotten that such factors only play the role of paving the way for the actions that correspond to them. They do not in any way cancel out man’s free-will. Without a doubt, certain instincts can be instigated by certain natural factors but is it not true that man has the ability to control a natural inclination?

In regards to the Prophet Yusef it must be said that all of the natural, physical, environmental and age

factors were present for him to perform an unbecoming act with Zulaykha however his spiritual luminosity, or in the parlance of the Qur'an his 'Divine Proof' (that was apparently some type of special knowledge²⁵) helped him overcome such factors. The wives of the Pharaoh and the wives of two of the greatest divine prophets, Lot and Noah, all found themselves in special environments. According to the argument of Watson, they all should have acted in accordance to the dictates of their environments. However, reality shows us that this was not the case. Each one of them freely chose a path [that contradicted the dictates of their surroundings] and those environmental factors were not able to shape their behavior.

ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا امْرَأَتَ نُوحٍ وَ امْرَأَتَ لُوطٍ كَانَتَا تَحْتَ عَبْدَيْنِ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا صَالِحِينَ فَخَانَتَاهُمَا فَلَمْ يُغْنِيَا عَنْهُمَا مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَقِيلَ ادْخُلَا النَّارَ مَعَ الدَّاهِلِينَ وَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا امْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَ نَجِّنِي مِنَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَ عَمَلِهِ وَ نَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

***Allah sets forth, for an example to the Unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot: They were (respectively) under two of our righteous servants, but they were false to their (husbands), and they profited nothing before Allah on their account, but were told: 'Enter ye the Fire along with (others) that enter!' And Allah sets forth, as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh: behold she said: 'O My Lord! Build for me, in nearness to thee, a mansion in the garden, and save me from Pharaoh and His doings, and save me from those that do wrong.'* (66: 10–11).**

We also accept in principle the influence of heredity factors [upon man's actions] but there is no doubting in the fact that they do not negate the free-will of man and cause him to be determined in his actions. The person who is born to cold and unloving parents is more prone to be violent. However, experience has taught us that there have been many children whose ancestors had particular traits but who have acted completely opposite to the behavior of their mothers and fathers.

They have chosen a direction in their lives that was opposed to the manner of living of their parents and ancestors. In many cases there have even been two brothers that were born to the same parents but who had completely different behaviors. Even though the son of Nuh ('a) had a father that was a prophet for 950 years he chose the path of evil. Kumayl ibn Ziyad and Harith ibn Ziyad were both from the same father and mother but one of them became one of the special companions of Imam Ali ('a) while the other courted eternal damnation by beheading the two sons of Muslim ibn Aqil. In conclusion, it is not possible to predict the behavior of human beings relying on genetic, hereditary and environmental factors and to the same extent it is not possible to use such factors as an excuse to say that they are not ethically responsible for their actions.

Theological Determinism

As was previously pointed out the problem of responsibility is closely related to some religious and

theological teachings such as ‘the Absolute Power of God, ‘the Absolute Knowledge of God’ and ‘the Divine Predestination’. Such ideas can easily be misunderstood and it is for this reason that some religious scholars fell into the trap of Determinism by relying upon such teachings (or should we say, by misinterpreting such teachings) and thus negated the ethical responsibility of men.

The Absolute Power Of God And Determinism

‘The Most Powerful’ is one of the attributes of God. This implies that God is someone that has power over all things and thus even man and his actions fall under God’s power. Every power is accidental and follows the power of God. Some of the western scholars are of the opinion that the will of man is like the will of a mount that is driven in whatever direction that God or Satan wishes. If God drives him in a certain direction, then he moves in that direction and if Satan drives him in another direction, then he will go in that direction. However, in no instant does he choose his rider.[26](#)

In any case, based upon the belief in the absolute power of God there remains no room for the power of man or his freely-willed actions. Some Islamic sects take recourse to this Divine Attribute to negate every kind of causality or effectiveness for things other than God. They clearly announce that ‘the actions of the servants of God are created by Him and the servants do not have the ability to create anything.’[27](#)

For example, in order to explain the effect of fire in the genesis of heat or eating in the genesis of satiation they take recourse to the unstable theory of ‘the Habit of God.’[28](#) These individuals have strove hard to prove their claims[29](#) and since they have seen that this view clearly leads to determinism they have attempted to save themselves from this problem by holding on to ‘the Theory of Acquisition.’[30](#) However, just as has been demonstrated in its own proper place this is also not something that can be a justifiable way [to negate determinism].[31](#)

The consequence of such a deviant way of thinking is that the actions of men will be directly related to God and thus man’s role in their creation will be completely negated. Thus, no one will be ethically responsible for their actions. In other words, the grave inference of such an abnormal way of thinking is that all ethical and legal systems of thought that seek to train and educate man (including the ethical and legal system of Islam) will be meaningless and futile. The reason for this is that if the Power of God is such that it leaves no further room for the free-will and independent choice of man then in this case responsibility, imperatives, prohibitions, rewards and punishments will no longer be spiritually consequential.[32](#)

Free-will is like salt for the food that is worship

If it were not for it then it would be mechanical[33](#) like the [revolving] of the heavens

It is not rewarded for its turns nor is it punished for them

Since, it is free-will that determines the skill of the worshipper on the Day of Reckoning

The entire Universe praises God freely

This is not a praise that has been forced upon them³⁴

In any case, we are of the belief that ‘the action is the action of God and [at the same time] it is our action³⁵’ and that there is no contradiction in the fact that a specific action be that of God and that of man. Of course, they are the actions of two agents that stand vertically aligned with one another in the hierarchy of existence.

The Absolute Knowledge Of God And Determinism

Another religious teaching is that God knows all things. ‘Verily He knows all things’. Some people have taken recourse to this rational and religious reality and surmised that the free-will and independent choice of man is nothing but a figment of the imagination. How is it possible for human beings to act contrary to the Divine Knowledge? If God knows that I will do something at some specific time then I must do so. From another point of view, if when that time comes, I still have the power to do otherwise then this would necessitate that God’s knowledge was a mistake.³⁶ This way of thinking has been adequately reflected in the famous quatrain that has been related to Omar Khayyam:

I drink wine and anyone that is like me
Will consider my drinking wine to be trifle
My drinking wine was known by God from eternity
If I do not drink wine then God’s knowledge would be wrong

In answer to this query, it must be said that God knows things exactly as they are and how they will take place. The actions that man performs through his own free-will are known by God as such. Therefore, if they were to come into existence by force then it would not be in accord with the Divine Knowledge. Therefore, there is no contradiction between the eternal and absolute knowledge of God and the free-will and independent choice of man.³⁷ The pre-knowledge of God does not threaten the free-will of man. The knowledge that God has that someone will attain felicity while another will be eternally damned does not necessitate that he will be so contrary to his choice. How beautifully have they answered Khayyam:

To understand the eternal Knowledge as the cause of sin
In the eyes of rational people this is the height of ignorance

Divine Predestination And Determinism

Belief in the Divine Predestination implies that the existence of all phenomena and their various stages of genesis, blossoming and termination are accomplished under the wise planning of God and that we understand the coming into existence of the conditions that they depend upon and the attainment of their final degree of perfection to be dependent upon God’s will. However, if man really be free then how is it possible for us to relate his actions to the will of God and the Divine Predestination? If the existence of

all phenomena, including the actions of men, depend upon the will of God then what does it mean when we say that man is free? In other words, every deed has an agent that performs it through its own free-will and it is impossible for one action to possess two agents. Therefore, if we relate the actions of man to his free-will and independent choice then it will not be possible for us to relate them to the will of God. Conversely, if we state that they stem from the will of God and His Divine Providence then we must negate them from the will of man. In this case we must say that man is a being upon which God acts and which does not have any choice in this regard.[38](#)

In reaction to this misgiving some have tried to rely upon the Divine Predestination and will of God to overlook the freedom of man and have fallen into the trap of determinism. They have Therefore, negated any kind of ethical responsibility from him. Others, in order to escape determinism have stated that man's actions lie outside the jurisdiction of Divine Providence. Such individuals have fallen into the trap that is Tafwiz [i.e. relegating the affairs of men to themselves].[39](#) The truth is that 'neither is determinism correct nor is the relegation of affairs to the servants rather something that lies between these two'[40](#). In order to explain: Relating one action to the will of two agents is impossible when both of those agents are horizontally aligned with one another (i.e. both of them lie on one plane of existence and thus neither of them are the cause of the other) or in the parlance of the philosophy they are agents that can replace one another in the creation of this action. On the other hand, if they were to be vertically aligned (i.e. if one of them were to play some part in the genesis of the other) then in this case it is possible to relate the one action to both of them.[41](#) Therefore, the will of God and His Divine Providence are not incompatible with the free-will of man.

بل قضا حق است و جهد بنده حق همین مباش اعر چون ابلیس خلق

Rather Providence is correct, as well as the effort of the servant
Do not be cross-eyed like Iblis the one created from fire

Attributing the action to man is [proper] on one level while its attribution to God is [even more proper] on a higher one. On that level the existence of man, the matter upon which he acts and the tools which he uses in his action are all related to God. Determinism implies that the will of God replaces that of man. However, if the will of God should stand on a higher plane than that of man then this will not lead to determinism. God wishes that man should come into existence in this Universe even while he possesses free-will and all of the other dimensions of his being. However, this does not lead to determinism [rather it emphasizes it]. The free-will of man, following his existence, is a pure 'relation' to God and this does not imply any form of determinism.[42](#)

تو ز قرآن باز خوان تفسیر بیت گفت ایزد ما رمیت از رمیت

گر بپرانیم تیر آن نی ز ما است ما کمان و تیراندازش خداست

این نه جبر این معنی جباری است ذکر جباری برای زاری است

گر نبودی اختیار این شرم چیست وین دریغ و خجلت و آزرم چیست

زجر استادان و شاگردان چرا است خاطر از تدبیرها گردان چرا است

Read once again from the Qur'an the interpretation of the verse

God said: You did not throw when you threw

If we shoot an arrow then that is not from us

We are the bow and the archer is God

This is not determinism; rather this is the meaning of God's Power

The remembrance of the All-Powerful makes us shed tears

Our tears and wails are a proof of our being compelled

Our shame is a proof that we are free

If it were not for free-will then why this shame

What is this disgrace shame and indignity for?

What are the toils of the masters and disciples for?

The Different Types Of Responsibility

Responsibility To God

Man is, without a doubt, responsible to God. The reason for this is that everything is from Him, belongs to Him and will return to Him. Nothing is independent of Him. The existence of everything depends upon Him in such a way that if He were to 'look away from' the world even for an instant 'the forms of the world would tumble'.

...لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ...

'To Him belongs whatsoever is in the Heavens and the Earth' (2: 255).

None of the blessings that man holds [independently] belongs to him. The true owner of all of the physical, spiritual, inner and outer blessings is the Most Holy Essence of the Divine. Keeping this in mind it becomes clear that man is to be held accountable for what he does with these blessings by their true

owner [i.e. God]. In other words, He has the right to ask us why we did what we did. He has the right to ask us: ‘Why did you not protect your eyes, ears and tongue from the insinuations of the Devil and the carnal soul. Why did you waste your life?’ The Holy Qur’an says that on the Day of Resurrection men will be asked similar questions:

وَقَفُّهُمْ إِنَّهُمْ مَسْئُولُونَ

‘And stop them, for they are to be questioned.’ (37: 24).

Man will definitely be questioned with regards to the blessings that were placed at his disposal:

ثُمَّ لَتُسْأَلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ

‘And verily they will be questioned today about the blessings.’ (102:8).

It should not be left unsaid that if God understands certain individuals or things other than Himself to possess rights or to own something then in this case we will be held accountable with regards to them. This is the reason that man will be questioned about how he acted with the Friends of God. Many traditions have been related under the verse:

ثُمَّ لَتُسْأَلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ

‘Then they will be questioned today about the blessings’ (102:8).

According to these the meaning of blessing here is the blessing of the Wilayah and Imamah of the Family of the Prophet (s).⁴³ It is quite likely that the responsibility that we have in regards to the Friends of God is the second greatest after the responsibility we have to God Himself; although this responsibility is a reflection of the responsibility that we have to God.⁴⁴ The responsibility that man has to his parents is also a manifestation of the responsibility he has to God.

Responsibility To One’s Self

Another responsibility that man has is his responsibility to himself.⁴⁵ The soul of man possesses many different facets and dimensions that are all related to one another. Each one of these has certain rights and as a result we are accountable for them. For example, man does not have the right to use his eyes, ears, hands, tongue and the rest of his limbs as he so fits.

إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

‘For every act of hearing, or of seeing or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning).’ (17:36).

Each one of the internal and external faculties has certain rights and, as has been indicated by the Holy Qur’an, they will be asked on the Day of Resurrection [about what man did with them] and they will bear witness against him then.

الْيَوْمَ نَخْتِمُ عَلَى أَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَتُكَلِّمُنَا أَيْدِيهِمْ وَتَشْهَدُ أَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

‘That Day shall we set a seal on their mouths. But their hands will speak to us, and their feet bear witness, to all that They did.’ (36:65).

In another verse of the Qur’an man’s responsibility towards himself has been expressed in the following way: ‘O ye who believe! Guard your own souls: if ye follow (right) guidance, no hurt can come to you from those who stray. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will Show you the truth of all that ye do.’ (5: 105). This verse states that first and foremost every man is responsible for his own guidance and felicity and that the guidance of those who are astray is not the responsibility of the believers:

تِلْكَ أُمَّةٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَلكُمْ مَا كَسَبْتُمْ وَلَا تُسْأَلُونَ عَمَّا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

‘That was a nation that has passed: for it there will be what it has earned, and for you there will be what you have earned, and you will not be questioned about what they used to do.’ (2: 134).

It is necessary to remind our readers that these verses do not contradict the obligation to enjoin what is good and to forbid what is evil.⁴⁶ In any case, man is responsible for his soul and one of the daily obligations of man is that he watch over his soul and take it to account every day:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَ لَتَنْظُرَ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ وَ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

‘O ye who believe! Fear Allah, and let every soul look to what (provision) He has sent forth for the morrow. Yea, fear Allah; For Allah is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do.’ (59: 18)

Responsibility In Relation To Others

In Islam every individual, aside from thinking about what is in his best interests and being responsible for himself, is also responsible in relation to the other individual members of society and his own species. Man has given rights over other individuals that everyone should observe. One of these is that every believing person should be concerned about the guidance and salvation of others. This importance is adequately shown by the two great responsibilities that are Enjoining the Good and Prohibiting the Evil

that have been placed alongside the ritual prayer and pilgrimage [as being one of the pillars of the Islamic faith].

Of course, in this responsibility it is God in reality who will take us to account. The reason for this is that it is He that has delineated obligations for individuals with respect to one another. It is for this reason that this [social] responsibility is not at the same level as the [personal] responsibility that we have before God. To be more precise, it is a manifestation of it. In reality, through the monotheistic view of Islam we believe that all responsibilities (including the responsibilities we have to ourselves, the other individuals of society and even animals and plants) are manifestations of the responsibility that we have before God. From this we can understand the incorrectness of the view of those that believe in the principality of society and that society possesses special rights [independent of everything including God] and therefore, its members will always be held accountable before it.

Responsibility In Relation To Other Beings

Another one of the most important kinds of ethical responsibilities of man that Islam has laid great emphasis upon is the responsibility that he has in relation to Nature and the other beings of this Universe, even plants and animals. Man does not have the right to act however he so pleases with the environment. Also, he cannot act as he wants with animals. Rather, animals also have rights over their masters that have been well explained in the Religious Traditions.⁴⁷ It has even been related in a tradition from Imam Ali that one should not curse animals since God has cursed the one that curses them.

¹. Moral Problems, p. 132.

². Moral Problems, p. 134.

³. 'Responsibility, Moral and Legal' by Arnold S. Kaufman, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 7, p. 183.

⁴. 'Responsibility, Moral and Legal' by Arnold S. Kaufman, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 7, p. 183; 'Responsibility' by R.A. Duff, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 8, p. 291.

⁵. Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character, p. 158.

⁶. 'Responsibility' by Michael J. Zimmerman, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 1089; 'Responsibility' by Duff, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 8, p. 290–292; Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character, p. 160–162.

⁷. 'Responsibility' by Michael J. Zimmerman, in the Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 1090.

⁸. Jamea wa Tarikh az Didgah Qur'an, p. 73–109.

⁹. Ma'arif Qur'an, p. 394–395.

¹⁰. Ma'arif Qur'an, p. 394.

¹¹. 'Responsibility' by M.J. Zimmerman, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 1093.

¹². A History of Philosophy, Frederick Charles Copleston, v. 1, p. 386.

¹³. Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 158; Aristotle, David Ross, p. 301–303.

¹⁴. Akhlaq Nikomachus, v. 1, p. 60.

¹⁵. Ma'arif Qur'an, p. 375–377.

¹⁶. Theological Instructions, v. 1–2, p. 173.

¹⁷. 'Responsibility' by M.J. Zimmerman, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 1090–1091; 'Responsibility, Moral and Legal' by A.S. Kaufman, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 7, p. 184.

¹⁸. Moral Problems, p. 132.

- [19.](#) Ethics, Spinoza, p. 62.
- [20.](#) Ethics, Spinoza, p. 149.
- [21.](#) Moral Problems, p. 135–138; ‘Responsibility’ by M.J. Zimmerman, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 1091–1093.
- [22.](#) Ma’arif Qur’an, p. 388–389.
- [23.](#) Moral Problems, p. 133–134, from ‘Darrow, Attorney for the Damned’ Philosophy: Paradox and Discovery, p. 302–304.
- [24.](#) Moral Problems, p. 145–147.
- [25.](#) This is shown by the use of the word ‘seen’ in the verse of the Qur’an: ‘...had he not seen the proof of his Lord’.
- [26.](#) ‘Determinism’ by Richard Taylor, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 2, p. 363.
- [27.](#) Maqalat al Islamiyin, v. 1, p. 321.
- [28.](#) This theory states that God has the habit of directly creating certain things after or at the same time that He creates certain others. For example, God always creates fire alongside heat even while the fire itself does not play any role in the heat’s genesis. (Tr.).
- [29.](#) al Luma, p. 69–92.
- [30.](#) This theory states that although it is God that creates the actions of His servants he does so when they make the intention to do so. Thus, they play a certain role in their genesis for had they had not intended to perform a certain action God would not have created it in them. (Tr.)
- [31.](#) Buhuth fi al Milal wa al Nihal, v. 2, p. 123–158.
- [32.](#) Amuzish Aqaed, v. 1–2, p. 171.
- [33.](#) This can also be translated as necessary.
- [34.](#) Mathnawi, 3rd Book, p. 3287–3289.
- [35.](#) This is a reference to a line from the famous philosophical poem of Sabziwari, the Liyali al Muntazimah.
- [36.](#) ‘Determinism’ by Richard Taylor, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 2, p. 363.
- [37.](#) Amuzish Aqaed, v. 1–2, p. 176–177.
- [38.](#) al Mughni, v. 8, p. 109–161.
- [39.](#) al Farq Bayn al Firaq, p. 114; al Mughni, v. 8, p. 3.
- [40.](#) This is a reference to a famous tradition from Imam Ja’far as Sadiq (‘a).
- [41.](#) Amuzish Falsafah, v. 2, p. 362; Amuzish Aqaed, v. 1–2, p. 183–186.
- [42.](#) Ma’arif Quran, p. 387.
- [43.](#) al Mizan, v. 20, p. 354–355.
- [44.](#) Bar Dargah Dust, p. 149–152.
- [45.](#) Akhlaq dar Qur’an, v. 2, p. 21–23.
- [46.](#) al Mizan, v. 6, p. 164.
- [47.](#) Wasael al Shia, v. 8, ch 9, p. 339; Man la Yahzurhu al Faqih, v. 2, traditions 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9; Sharae al Islam, v. 1–2, p. 575.

Chapter 8: An Examination Of The Theory Of Ethical Relativity

Another one of the most important discussions in the Philosophy of Ethics that has extraordinary practical effects for individuals and societies is whether ethical rules and values are absolute or relative. In other words, are ethical values, rules and principles the product of social, psychological, cultural and other factors and the likes of these such that the former would change and vary with changes and

variations [that should happen to occur] in the latter? Or are ethical values stable and perennial things such that the changes in time and place would have no effect upon them? What are the arguments of those who adhere to ethical relativity? Where is the fallacy of such arguments? How can we prove the absoluteness of ethical principles and values? Also, are all ethical rules and values absolute and stable or does there exist relative values capable of change?

The Different Kinds Of Ethical Relativity

First off, it is fitting to explain some of the various kinds of ethical relativity and to clarify the meaning of each one. In this way we can gain a clearer perspective of what is being argued over and also obtain a more precise comprehension of the proofs of those who adhere to ethical relativity. In general, it is possible to say that the most important types of ethical relativity are the following: Meta-Ethical Relativism, Descriptive Relativism and Normative Relativism. We will, hereunder, explain each one of these theories:

Descriptive Relativism

The difference in ethical traits of the diverse nations and societies has always preoccupied the minds and thoughts of philosophers. From the time of Ancient Greece there were always discussions surrounding this topic and its corollaries. The encounter of the Greeks with other nations and societies and their acquaintance with their ethical ideas and values caused some of the philosophers of that era such as Protagoras to consider man to be the measure of everything. Such individuals stated that 'ugliness and beauty' as well as 'justice and oppression' are things that are founded upon the customs and traditions of human beings.¹ In the twentieth century, with the expansion of social and international relations and the growth of social and anthropological sciences clearer and more serious proofs for the differences between the ethical values of various groups and societies was obtained. Eskimos abandon old people in the snow so that they may die from hunger.

Some tribes consider stealing to be ethically permissible. The members of certain tribes from the Malaysian Islands consider friendship and cooperation with others to be something unbecoming. In some societies children are obliged to kill or choke their old parents. This is while all of these actions are ethically wrong in our society. In some South Asian countries people smell each other when they want to show the utmost respect. In Western countries, especially in Latin America, when people want to display their respect to a speaker they kiss their face, whether they be a man or a woman. However, in the Islamic society it is very unbecoming for a woman to kiss a strange man and vice versa.²

When we study the ethical conduct of a specific society throughout time, we can clearly see the fluctuations in their ethical values. Until recent decades, in some western countries if someone were to come out in public in a short-sleeved shirt then the police would arrest him. Such an action was considered morally unbecoming. Today, however, the ethical standard of that same society has changed

and anyone can come out in the public eye as he so desires and no one will consider his action to be immoral. Therefore, it can be gathered that aside from the fact that the ethical values of different societies, groups and individuals are poles apart, in a single society they also vary from time to time and are [thus] relative.³

It is necessary to remind our readers that the claim of Descriptive Relativism is not simply that 'the ethical rules of different individuals and societies are different' rather they claim that the principle ethical rules (not only their derivatives) also fluctuate and are even contradictory [to one another at times].⁴ In other words, the claim of Descriptive Relativism is that the ethical values and principles of individuals fundamentally contradict one another.⁵ What is meant by 'fundamental contradiction' is that even if there is a consensus of opinion regarding the distinctions of some specific thing under consideration the [underlying] difference of opinion will not be erased.

For example, the difference of opinion regarding the permissibility or impermissibility of children killing their elderly parents is not always because of a fundamental difference of opinion on ethical values (i.e. a difference of opinion as regards the principle of paying respect to one's parents). The reason for this is that it is possible for the adherents of such an action to kill their parents because they feel that this is necessary for the eternal salvation of their parents or because they hold that killing old people relieves them of their pain and even protects their dignity. Thus, may kill them out of the utmost respect and love for them. Therefore, in such instances, in the words of William Frankena: 'there is a difference in objective beliefs [regarding the external world] not ethical beliefs.'⁶ Such differences of opinion can be solved by means of dialogue and conversation regarding the realities existing in the Universe. A fundamental difference of opinion is when there is a difference in 'ethical beliefs' in such a way that even if there is an agreement regarding the characteristics of the action under consideration, there may not be any way to resolve the difference of opinion of the two parties [with regards to it].⁷

It should be stated that Descriptive Relativists can be divided into two categories: 1. Extreme and 2. Conservative; According to the extreme line of thought all of the principal values of various society possess a fundamental difference between one another. However, according to the more conservative trend the fundamental differences only exist in some of the principal values in some similar cases throughout time for some individuals, groups and societies. ⁸

Descriptive Relativism, in reality, falls within the jurisdiction of Sociology, Anthropology and the likes of these sciences and there is still much discussions going on regarding its correctness.⁹ Some foreign anthropologists and psychologists in the west have even doubted in the truth of such a theory.¹⁰ The reality of the matter is that the claim of the extreme relativists is very far-fetched and unbelievable. Can we really conceive of a society that considers justice to be bad and oppression to be good, aside from differences of opinion regarding the [particular] instances of such concepts? Can an individual, group or society be imagined that considers the killing of innocent people to be ethically permissible? Yes, it is possible that there be differences regarding the meaning and instances of 'innocence' but can we

imagine a society that considers stealing, in the proper meaning of this word, to be permissible?

Taking into consideration the reports and the, technically speaking, scientific investigations of the orientalist regarding our own society it is very likely that the reality of the matter be something else. Edward Brown and Comte de Gobineau are two of the most famous European orientalists, the second of which spent at least five years in Iran and regarding the former some specialists have born witness that no one has researched the literature of Iran and the ideas of the Muslim philosophers and mystics more than he. However, in his book *A History of Literature in Iran*¹¹ he says: 'Gobineau has made a mistake regarding the meaning of the word 'asfar' which is the plural of 'sifr' meaning book and says that it is the plural form of 'safar' [meaning journey]. On page 81 of his book *The Religions and Philosophies of the Middle East* he writes: 'Mulla Sadra has written a few other books regarding traveling.' As can be seen these two famous orientalists have made a grave mistake [regarding the book *al Asfar*]. One of them considers this word to be the plural form of sifr book while the other says that the book was a travel log. This is while, in the words of the martyr Mutahhari 'If these two individuals were to have personally read the first page of the *al-Asfar* then they would have known that asfar is neither the plural form of the word sifr nor is it a travel log.'¹²

This Gobineau in a book entitled 'Three Years in Iran' writes the following regarding the manner in which Iranians greet each other: 'After you and your host and everyone else has sat down then you turn to the host and say: 'Is your nose, by the will of God, fat?' Then the host will say: 'By the grace of God my nose is fat. How is your nose?' I have even seen such a question being asked from one person five times and he answered them each time...'¹³ Even though Mr. Gobineau lived many years among the Iranian people and could speak the Persian language very well he made such a mistake regarding the formal conduct and daily actions of the Iranian people. Now, how can one rely on the reports of such individuals regarding the spiritual conditions, ethical conduct and metaphysical concepts of other nations and societies? We will assess this kind of relativism more while criticizing the proofs of the Relativists.

Meta-Ethics

The second type of Relativism that has been discussed by the Philosophers of Ethics is Meta-Ethical Relativism. According to this view, that is often discussed under the general heading of 'epistemological relativism'¹⁴, we must not understand only one of the many conflicting ethical rules or systems to be correct and the other ethical rules and systems to be incorrect and unjustifiable.¹⁵ The adherents of such a kind of relativism hold that 'with regards to the principle ethical rules, there is no reasonable and authentic way to justify one [system or rule] as opposed to the other. As a result, it is possible that two principal rules that contradict one another each possess an equal amount of authenticity.'¹⁶

The general claim that is accepted by all of those who adhere to Meta-Ethical Relativism is that there is not simply one correct ethical standard. Rather, there can be at least two or more correct ethical standards. It is for this reason that they believe that ethical terms such as good, correct and the likes of

these must be interpreted in a way that it be possible to apply them to various contradictory ideologies. The adherents of such a viewpoint have tried in various ways to prove this idea. In its proper place we will examine and criticize their proofs.

Meta-Ethical Relativists can, in one way, be divided into two sub-groups: Extremism and Conservatism. According to the extreme version of this idea all of the ethical systems are equally true and justifiable and we cannot say that there is one single system that is more true or justifiable than another. However, the more conservative relativists, while denying that only one ethical system is correct, claims that some ethical systems are truer and more justifiable than others. Philosophers such as Walzer, Wong and Foot all adhere to the second version [of this ideology].

In another way this [ethical] relativism can be divided into two general sub-groups: Conventionalism and Subjectivism. ¹⁷ Conventionalism holds that [the nature of] ethical principles depend upon the culture, habits and customs of a society. For example, Sociologists [with an inclination to such an ethical relativism] believe that the legitimacy of ethical principles depends upon their collective acceptance by society and the social contract [which that society makes with regards to their propriety]. In other words, the correctness or incorrectness of a certain action in the eyes of a specific individual depends upon the society of which that individual is a member.

‘The correctness or incorrectness of the actions of an individual depends upon the essence of the society from which he stems. That which is ethically good or bad must be considered in light of the grounds of belief, wants, beliefs, history and social atmosphere [in which that action is performed].’ ¹⁸

However, according to Subjectivism the authenticity of ethical principles depends upon the individual choice and personal tastes and feelings of an individual person and not the society [as a whole]. The Emotionalism of Ayer and Stevenson are two blaring examples of this kind of Relativism. Based upon this view there remains no more room for ethical judgments or demonstrations.

Normative Relativism

The third type of ethical relativism says: ‘That which is correct and good for an individual or society is not correct or good for another individual or society even under similar conditions.’ ¹⁹ Since this type of ethical relativism expounds a normative rule, is named Normative Relativism. As we have seen until now, Descriptive Relativism and Meta-Ethical Relativism do not hold an individual logically responsible for an ethical rule. Descriptive Relativism simply describes the differences between the ethical principles of various individuals and societies. Meta-Ethical Relativism discusses the justification of different ethical rules and whether or not ethical principles are always justifiable and true or not. However, this type of relativism presents a normative rule and says the following to individuals and societies: One must not be adamant upon following certain stable ethical rules and appraise the ethical values that have been accepted by others based upon one’s own ethical standards. In reality they teach one how to interact with those individuals that have different ethical values than ours. ²⁰ This type of relativism takes it for

granted that first of all the ethical values that have been accepted by different individuals and societies differ from one another and possess fundamental dissimilarities from one another.

This type of relativism, which is usually accepted by anthropologists, has many social and international repercussions and it is possible that its formation by some western thinkers was for this very reason.²¹ According to this outlook one society does not have the right to reprimand another society because it has disobeyed certain ethical rules of conduct and the likes of these or to ask everyone to act upon the norms that it has personally accepted. This outlook can also be used to subdue the differences of opinion between the individuals of a society regarding specific problems.

For example, it is possible that the members of society have different opinions regarding the permissibility or impermissibility of abortion and that these differences of opinion lead to serious social conflict. However, by relying upon Normative Relativism it is possible to tell people not to be so sensitive to the opinions of others. As will become clearer in the forthcoming discussions the foundations of this view are fundamentally incorrect.

A Delineation Of The Subject Of Debate

From amongst the three forms of ethical relativism that we have just mentioned it is the second which is directly related to the Philosophy of Ethics, that is Meta-Ethical Relativism. Descriptive Relativism falls, in reality, under the auspices of Anthropology and Sociology and Normative Relativism is actually an outcome and consequence of Descriptive and Meta-Ethical Relativism. Of course, it must be kept in mind that the belief in Normative Relativism is not the logical consequence of accepting Descriptive and Meta-Ethical Relativism. In other words, neither of the two logically results in Normative Relativism. Rather what is meant is that one of the conditions for the acceptance of Normative Relativism is that we accept that there are differences in ethical systems and that we recognize that all or some of them are justifiable.²²

In other words, it is not logically problematic that someone accepts Descriptive or Meta-Ethical Relativism and at the same time ethically evaluates ethical systems other than his own. Therefore, in this section we will concentrate our attention on the analysis and critique of Meta-Ethical Relativism. However, before presenting the proofs of this manner of thinking it is fitting that we briefly introduce some of the schools of thought in relativism.

Schools Of Thought Within Ethical Relativism

If it is not possible for us to say that the acceptance of relativism in ethics is the natural consequence of those schools of thought that understand ethical rules to be inbuilt in nature then we can at least state that these schools of thought are more ready to recognize this matter. In this section we will point out some of those ideologies that have accepted ethical relativism and following this we will criticize Meta-Ethical Relativism.

Personal Hedonism

There are some ethical schools of thought that explicitly state that ethics is relative while there are others that have not explicitly stated such a thing however, we can gather from their principles and ideological foundations that they must believe in ethical relativism. For example, the necessary outcome of the principles and ideological foundations of Personal Hedonism is that ethical rules are relative. Aristippus of Cyrene (435 B.C.),²³ the representative of this ideology, was of the belief that a good act is one that our nature takes pleasure in and that creates happiness within us while a bad action is one that is not pleasing for us and causes us pain and distress.

Therefore, from the point of view of this school of thought, personal pleasure and pain are the measure of [ethical] goodness and evil. Every human being must act in such a way that his personal pleasure may be secured. It is for this reason that one action may be pleasing for one individual while it may be painful for another and be neutral for a third. In this case it will be [ethically] good for the first, [ethically] bad for the second and be ethically neutral for the third (meaning it is neither good nor bad for him).

Marxist Ethics

The ethics of Marxism is relative and susceptible to change. In the opinion of the Marxists the ethics of a feudal society is different from that of a Proletariat one. Every society and era from history has its own ethical demands. Above all one of the principal foundations of the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism is that everything is in a state of change and fluctuation. The natural conclusion that can be drawn from this principle in the field of ethics is that it cannot be said of a certain ethical trait that it is always and for everyone a virtue or a vice. Rather, its goodness or evil follows the historical conditions [in which it exists]. Therefore, according to the ethics of the Marxist it cannot be said in an absolute manner that, 'Stealing is evil,' rather one must see in what historical setting one has stolen. In the feudal system it is evil for the masses to steal from the land-owners since if this were not so that system would not progress and reach the stage of capitalism.

It is necessary in the Proletariat system that wealth be centralized so that with its help large factories can be made. However, if from the beginning the workers begin stealing and take the wealth of their masters then no amount of capital will be centralized. Therefore, in this stage of history stealing is bad. However, when a society reaches a stage where a revolution is to come about within it then its value system will be changed and thus stealing the wealth of the capitalists will be something good. In any case, ethical values follow the social upheavals of a society, especially its economic conditions.

Socialism

Also, sociologists such as Durkheim believe that a proper and good action is one that is acceptable to a society or specific group while a bad and unbecoming action is one that is hated by them. Even if a society considers homicide or theft to be permissible the performance of such acts by the members of

such a society will be good and acceptable. Other individuals and societies will not have the right to reprimand and to ethically evaluate their actions based upon their own ethical standards.

In other words, every society has its own ethical values all of which are correct in relation to that society. Even though it is possible that there exists certain common and global ethical value there is, however, no guarantee that they will last forever or that they will remain universal. In any case, according to the view of the socialists it is not correct to use the ethical rules of a group or specific society to assess other groups and societies. It is not proper to speak of absolute and universal ethical rules and principles.

Emotionalism

The logical result of a school of thought such as Emotionalism is also nothing other than ethical relativism. The reason for this is that if ethical rules simply express the emotions of the speaker and has no root in external reality then logically it is not possible to expect others to feel the same emotions [and thus to believe in the same ethical rules]. It is possible that there may be multifold emotions and inclinations equal to the number of human beings existing in this world.

A Description And Critique Of The Proofs Of Ethical Relativism

The adherents of Meta-Ethical Relativism have taken recourse to a number of proofs in order to substantiate their beliefs. Sometimes they have held on to general Epistemological Relativism and at other times they have used Descriptive Relativism [as evidence].²⁴ Here, we will relate and criticize the most important of their proofs.

Demonstration By Way Of Descriptive Relativism

A famous proof that has been used to prove Meta-Ethical Relativism is founded upon Descriptive Relativism.²⁵ This proof goes as follows: Since certain actions are acceptable and good in certain societies while they are unacceptable and evil in others we can understand that ethical values are relative and that their ruling is different in relation to various individuals and societies. It is even possible that something be considered good in one era while it be considered evil in another.

As was previously indicated there is still a debate regarding the correctness of Descriptive Relativism. Some of the thinkers in the field the Humanities have seriously doubted the legitimacy of such a concept. In reality, it must be proven that 'the principle ethical rules of human beings are different and conflicting, even if those human beings are completely taught [in the same manner] and all of them possess common objective beliefs.'²⁶ If not then it is not possible to reach that conclusion simply by showing that there is a difference in the principle ethical rules of various societies.

'The reason for this is that it is possible for the aforementioned differences to stem from a difference or deficiency in beliefs regarding the external world.'²⁷ The relativists are incapable of proving such a thing. How is it possible to prove that 'even if all human beings are educated properly and have clear [ethical]

ideas and common objective ethical beliefs they will still possess different ethical principles?'[28](#)

Say that two individuals possess two distinct ethical rulings [regarding an action]. Assuming that their difference of opinion does not lay in an assessment of what ethical concept the action is an instance of, there are a number of possibilities at play here:

1. Another difference of understanding has caused a difference in the ethical ruling of the said action. Assume that one of the two individuals is of the belief that one way of acquiring ownership of something is to simply find it. In this case, if someone else were to take that thing without the permission of the one who found it this would be tantamount to stealing and an evil action. However, the other person does not consider finding something to be the cause of ownership and in his eyes if someone else were to take it this would not be an evil deed. This is because in the eyes of the latter this is not stealing. In other words, the difference of opinion of these two lays in their definition of ownership and as a result in their definition of stealing. It is not true that one of them considers stealing to be good in certain cases while the other says that it is absolutely wrong.
2. It is possible that their difference of opinion lay in the fact that they have a different outlook with regards to certain other realities. Say that one of these two believes that killing any human being to be evil [under all circumstances] while the other considers this to be good in some cases. It is possible that this difference of opinion be because the first person is unaware of the outcome of terminating a killer or apostate who threatens the life or beliefs of others. So, it is likely that by correcting this belief he may become of the same faith as the second person.
3. Each one of them may have the same take on a certain action and the realities that are related to that and still have a real difference of opinion with regards to the ethical ruling of the action.

It is clear that the third possibility, which is in fact the claim of the Descriptive Realists, is not one hundred percent sure and there always exists the possibility that the other two options are true. Therefore, such relativists cannot simply prove their claim by means of the existence of a difference of opinion regarding the ethical ruling of a certain action.

Even if we overlook the abovementioned objections then it must be said that it is only possible to use Descriptive Relativism as a particular proposition in order to refute the claims of those who state that all ethical values are absolute and that none of the ethical values or rulings are relative [in any way whatsoever]. In order to explain: If someone were to claim that every value concept and every good, bad, must and must not are absolute then in order to refute his claim it is enough for us to point out that a certain action is good in one society while it is unacceptable in another. In other words, in response to that statement which is made in the form of a universal proposition the gist of which is that all good and bad things and value statements are absolute and universal it is possible to present a particular negative proposition and in this case the former proposition and universal ruling will be negated. However, based upon this way of thinking it is only possible for us to prove the relativity of a portion of ethical values and we have in no way negated that we possess certain absolute ethical values.[29](#)

However, using Descriptive relativism in an extreme manner and in the form of a universal proposition (aside from having the abovementioned objections) needs us to prove a bona fide and primary difference in all of the values that have been accepted by people and nations. However, it is not [practically] possible for us to completely assess all of the ethical rulings of the various societies in all areas.

However, the most important objection that can be leveled here regarding the derivation of Meta-Ethical Relativism from Descriptive Relativism is that even if we admit to a real difference between the various individuals and societies with regards to the ethical value of all actions we cannot understand this to be a proof for the legitimacy of Meta-Ethical Relativism. The reason for this is that the existence of a difference in the ethical systems [of this world] does not logically prove the correctness and truth of all of them or that they are not [objectively] founded upon realities.³⁰ In other words, in the same way that the existence of a difference of opinion in a certain science does not mean that all of those opinions are correct, the existence of a difference of opinion in the ethical evaluation of actions is in no way a proof that all of those evaluations are correct or that there is no real ethical values.

Demonstration By Means Of Understanding Ethical Rules To Be Inshai In Nature

Understanding ethical statements to be inshai is another stance [that is used as a foundation] for the relativity of ethics. Most of the individuals and schools of thought that have understood ethical rules to be inshai have accepted the relativity of ethics, either explicitly or implicitly. As we have seen, schools of thought such as Emotionalism and Socialism that understand the foundation of ethical rules to be the emotions and tastes of individuals or human societies are of the belief that it is not possible to believe in stable ethical principles. The reason for this is that, first of all, it is possible that the emotions and inclinations of different individuals and societies be dissimilar. Secondly, with a change in the tastes and emotions of persons and their social preferences a change will occur in their ethical judgments.

Keeping in mind the matter that we have presented in detail in the previous chapters (especially the third, fourth and fifth chapter) it will become clear that not only are ethical concepts (whether they be used as subjects or predicates) secondary philosophical concepts that have a source of abstraction in the external world, what is more, ethical statements are themselves declaratory and seek to express a real relation that exists between certain actions and their effects. Therefore, this stance of ethical relativism is also incorrect.

Sometimes the relativity [of ethical statements] is justified by means of the conventional nature of ethical rules. In order to explain: According to this view: Ethical rules are conventional ones. The goodness and evil of actions depend upon how someone convenes them to be. Their goodness or evil do not possess an objective reality outside the convention of the individual. Anytime certain sane individuals deem it necessary to convene upon a certain concept in order to achieve their goals they agree upon that

concept so that in this way their goals may be achieved. For example, they agree upon ownership and matrimony (under specific conditions) in order to secure certain interests that they have taken into consideration. Ethical concepts and judgments are also of this nature and depend upon the convention of rational human beings which in turn depends upon the benefits and harms that they seek to secure or hinder. The benefits and losses of individuals and societies are abstracted from the relation between needs and things that can fulfill those needs. Hence, in reality conventional concepts and rules depend upon the needs of human beings which in turn do not have any sort of stable form. Individuals and societies [and their needs] change with time and place. Therefore, that which is abstracted from such needs and then convened based upon them will be susceptible to change as well. In conclusion, ethical rules and concepts are similar to other conventional concepts and have no objective reality. Therefore, such ethical rules are shaky and in a state of flux.

In other words, stable and unchanging propositions are ones that are proven through logical demonstration. The reason for this is that the conditions of a logical demonstration are that its premises be continuous, necessary and universal. It is also natural that its conclusion will partake of these qualities as well. Every rational proposition, whether it be related to philosophy or to other theoretical sciences, will be universal, stable, continuous and absolute provided that it is a proposition that we are certain is true. For example, since mathematical propositions are demonstrable their results are stable and absolute (whether they are found in arithmetic or geometry). If the propositions that are found in the natural sciences are certain in nature then they will also possess such characteristics. Universality, necessity, stability and continuity are the distinctions of objective rules. This means that they are rules that are abstracted from external reality and follow a certain set of causes and effects. Since the law of cause and effect is something stable its consequences will also be so. Accordingly, the conclusions that are founded upon the law of causality are also stable and continuous. Ethical propositions are, however, not of such a nature. The concepts that we use in ethical propositions have not been derived from external reality. The subjects of such propositions are abstract concepts and their predicates are also conventional concepts that revolve around the needs of individuals and societies. As we have previously stated we have no proof in our hands that the needs of human beings are stable and do not change. Therefore, we cannot present any logical demonstration for the stability and absoluteness of ethical rules. Rather, it must be accepted that ethical rules are relative.

There are many logical fallacies in this theory several of which are not directly related to our discussion and which we cannot delve into in detail at the moment. Right now, however, we wish to stress upon a point that, although simple, possesses a great consequence. This is the explanation of what is meant when we say that ethical concepts and rules are conventional. Does this mean that ethical concepts and statements are conventions that are completely disconnected from reality and are not related to the external world? Is the conception of ethical ideas and rules something that depends upon the needs and desires of the person who convenes them? Or are they conventions that are abstracted from real beings and external realities and are not related to the emotions and feelings of individuals?

Since the words itibar and itibari³¹ possess various usages in philosophical texts it is necessary to first of all indicate some of the most frequently utilized meanings and usages of this term so that we may prevent any sort of fallacy of equivocation from taking place [in our current discussion].³² After this we will see in what meaning we can understand ethical rules to be itibari. The most important meanings of the word itibari are the following:

Secondary Intelligibles

According to one meaning, all secondary intelligibles, whether they are logical or philosophical, are called itibari. Even the concept of existence can be considered to be itibari [in this meaning of the term]. In this usage the concept of itibari is employed in contrast to a concept that is a quiddity. This meaning has been frequently used in the sayings of Sheikh Ishraq and usually he means by 'intellectual conventions' this very connotation.

Concepts That Are Not Principle In Nature

In the discussions on 'the principality of existence or quiddity' the word itibari is used in contrast to principality. If something is 'principle' then this means that it is 'real', that 'essentially it is the source of real effects in the external world', that 'it essentially exists' and that 'it fills the pages of the book of existence'.³³ In contrast, itibari means that something does not possess external reality, it essentially cannot be the source of any real effects [in the external world] and that it does not fill the pages of the book of existence. Rather, it is a figment of the imagination or it is abstracted by the mind from the non-existence which is the boundaries of an existing being.

Concepts Formed By The Imagination

According to a third meaning of the term, itibari means those concepts that are formed by the faculty of the Imagination which in no way have any instance in the external world or in the mind and that are fashioned by the faculty of imagination such as the concept of 'the Boogie-Man'.

Ideas That Depend In Their Conception Upon The Individual And Social Needs Of Human Beings

Itibari in this usage of the term means a concept or rule that does not have a real source of abstraction in the external world. Rather, it is simply fashioned based upon the personal and collective needs of individuals such as the concept of ownership and leadership.

Now it has become clear, without a doubt, that the meaning of itibari in the abovementioned proof is not one that stands opposed to principality³⁴. Also, bearing in mind the explanation that will come after this it can be gathered that it is incorrect to consider ethical concepts to be imaginary. Therefore, the third meaning of itibari is also not intended here. However, if by itibari in the abovementioned proof the fourth

meaning of this term is intended it seems that the comparison of the convention of ethical concepts and rules with other conventions such as ownership and matrimony is not a proper one.

In order to explain: One cannot consider all conventions to follow the personal and collective needs and desires of human beings. Rather, only those things that are invented in a society and are metaphorical concepts are such. Ownership and matrimony are examples of such concepts since they follow the personal and collective needs of human beings and are simply conventional things. It is for this very reason that various societies have a variety of conventions [in relation to them]. For example, in one society they come to the agreement that the words 'bitu' (I sell) and 'ishtaraytu' (I buy) are the cause of ownership while in another society it is the signature of the buyer and seller that causes ownership to come about while in a yet third society it is shaking hands that causes ownership to come into existence.[35](#)

It is also possible that in some other place they have agreed that ownership should come into existence in some other way. In any case, ownership is a conventional thing and depends upon the manner in which people agree upon its cause and there is no real relation between conventional causes and their effects. Usually, the standard used in the convention of concepts is the best interests of society and the ease or simplicity of certain works.

However, it must be kept in mind that, mainly, there are no discussions in philosophy regarding metaphors, allegories and social contracts. The itibari concepts that are discussed in the philosophical sciences, one of which is the Philosophy of Ethics, are those that possess a real source of abstraction in the external world and do not depend [in their conception] upon the changing needs and personal desires of individuals. Yes, we also accept the fact that all philosophical concepts, including the dos and don'ts of ethics are itibari [in one sense] and conceptual but not in the sense that they hinge upon the emotions and feelings of individuals and society. More accurately, it means that their conception depends upon the human mind. In other words, if the human being did not exist then such concepts would also not exist. The reason for this is that as we stated previously, philosophical concepts are such that their occurrence is in the mind.

Of course, even though ethical concepts and rules are itibari and do not possess entified reality they do have a real source of abstraction in the external world. This is exactly like the ideas of cause, effect, possibility, necessity and other philosophical concepts that are abstracted from external beings and do not depend upon the changing desires of the individual that forms them. Whether we want to or not, know it or not, fire in the external world is the cause of heat and its being a cause [for heat] is not something that revolves around the needs, feelings, comprehension or understanding of individuals. The extensions of such a causality are the same in the field of ethics and do not depend upon the personal inclinations and feelings of individuals. The relation that telling the truth, lying, justice, oppression and other actions that stem from the free-will of man have with the consequences that accrue from them is not one that has been concocted by humans. Rather, this is an objective relationship that possesses

entified reality. Whether we wish it or not, whether we know it or not, telling the truth is effective in the soul's acquiring [ethical] perfection while lying causes the soul to be distanced from [this] perfection.

Ethical Absolutism

By now it has been clearly understood that ethical relativism is an unacceptable doctrine. The various schools of thought that adhere to ethical relativism do not possess a justifiable ideological foundation. Also, the proofs that have been presented for relativism [in ethics] are barren and incapable of establishing it as true. In this section we wish to defend absolutism in ethics. Absolutism claims that ethical values (or at least the principle ethical values) are everlasting and universal and possess real and perennial standards [by means of which they are assessed]. However, before explaining our theory in detail it is fitting that we point out some of the different schools of thought within absolutism.

The Schools Of Thought Within Absolutism

The Theory Of Ethical Felicity

Apparently, the ethical school of thought of the ancients was absolute in nature. Socrates, for example (who can be considered the founder of the ethical school of thought of felicity) was of the opinion that ethical virtues (which are the necessary and sufficient conditions for acquiring felicity) are constant and unchangeable realities³⁶. Even though human beings have apparent differences because of the different temporal and spatial conditions in which they exist, they have a single unwavering nature. This perennial nature necessitates that they possess unchanging needs and aspirations. Therefore, ethical virtues are always stable and unchangeable.³⁷

Even though Plato made corrections and amendments to the ethical theory of Socrates he accepted in essence his school of thought.³⁸ Hence, in his view ethics is something stable and unchangeable and the temporal and spatial conditions [in which humans find themselves] do not have an effect upon ethical values. Aristotle also accepted the theory of ethical felicity of Socrates and Plato albeit after making certain revisions and modifications to it. He was of the opinion that the way to achieving ethical virtue, and as a result ethical felicity, was [to practice] justice. It can be gathered from the apparent nature of his sayings that justice is always and in all societies the criterion for goodness. For example, in his opinion courage is good for everyone, in every instance and all the time. This is while the two virtues that lay on the other end of the spectrum of courage (i.e. foolhardiness and cowardliness) are bad in the same [unconditional] manner.

Epicurism

Epicure (270–342 B.C.), who believed that the standard for the goodness and evil of actions is [the] pleasure [that accrues from them]³⁹, was also of the opinion that ethical virtues are absolute. He divided the pleasures of human beings into three categories: 1. Natural and necessary pleasures such as eating

and drinking. Epicure held that the acquisition of such pleasures was always good and acceptable. 2. Unnatural and unnecessary pleasures such as the pleasure that one experiences from popularity and social standing. He was of the opinion that such pleasures must be forsaken in an absolute manner and that they are, in reality, always bad and unacceptable. 3. Natural yet unnecessary pleasures such as the pleasure of marriage and eating tasty foods. He considered the satisfaction that one acquires from [partaking in] such pleasures to be good if they are moderate in nature but held that going to an extreme with regards to them was deplorable. It can be gathered from such a division that Epicure also considered [at least certain] ethical virtues to be stable and absolute. He held that pleasures that must be acquired are always good and that so for everyone and said that the unnatural and unnecessary pleasures are always bad and that so for everyone.

The Theory Of An Ethical Conscience

The adherents of the theory of an ethical conscience, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778 A.D.), understand the ruling of the conscience to be the standard by means of which we assess [ethical] goodness and evil. Apparently, they mean to say that human nature and [the] conscience [within us] is something stable and continuous in such a manner that it is not influenced by [the] historical and social factors [in which it finds itself]. It always rules in the same way. Rousseau said: ‘Our conscience never tricks us. It is the true guide of human beings. The relation of the conscience to the spirit is like the relation of nature to the body. Whoever obeys it has obeyed nature and should not fear going astray.’[40](#)

The School Of Thought Of Kant

Amongst the later day philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) defended absolutism in ethics more than anyone else. In his opinion ethical virtues are absolute and do not change under any circumstances. They do not accept of exceptions. The goodness of actions such as ‘telling the truth’ and ‘keeping one’s promise’ are universal and perennial.[41](#)

Fundamentally speaking, Kant considers those actions as being ethically good that first of all stem from man’s free–will and are his responsibility [to perform]. Secondly, they should be executed with the intention that one is doing one’s duty by performing them. Man is responsible for that action which he can respectively ask anyone else to do under any circumstances whatsoever. In other words, the absolute command of Kant says: Act in such a way that it is as if the ideology of your conduct, through your will, be one of the general laws of nature.[42](#) He was of the opinion that the source of this ‘absolute command’ is the self–evident judgment of the practical intellect and can be considered as one of the apriori rulings that the practical intellect commands us to perform without recourse to experimentation.[43](#) In sum, this absolute command, for which many different explanations have been presented[44](#), is that all of the ethical responsibilities and duties must be absolute rulings and must not be specifically for a certain individual or society. It should also not possess special conditions and states.

Our Opinion

We claim that all of the ethical values are absolute and do not depend upon the personal tastes and conventions of individuals. At the same time we accept that some of the ethical rules are relative, albeit in another meaning of this word. These relative ethical rules are conditioned with certain special conditions. We will explain the meaning of relativity and absoluteness more so that this matter can become further clarified.

It is possible to say that the relativity of a certain rule has two distinct meanings. Sometimes the meaning of relativity is that the ruling of a certain subject is different in relation to the different states and conditions which that subject undergoes. For example, we say that water's boiling at 100 degrees is relative. This means that the temperature at which water boils is relative to the purity of the water and the air pressure of the atmosphere in which the water is.

Therefore, the abovementioned ruling is not stable and unchangeable. Rather, it fluctuates in relation to the specific conditions and circumstances that exist in the external world [and in which the water can be found]. Yes, if the water is unadulterated and the air pressure remain stable then the abovementioned ruling will be stable and unchanging for the specific subject [under consideration]. In other words, pure water, under a specific atmospheric pressure, will always boil at one hundred degrees. In contrast, some rules are absolute. This means that they do not change with the changing of circumstances and conditions. For example, a physical force will unconditionally increase the speed of the movement of a physical body [that it encounters].

Therefore, some physical laws are absolute while others are relative and conditional. Both types of laws can even be found amongst mathematical propositions. The proposition: 'Every triangle has at least two acute angles' is absolute while the proposition: 'Every triangle has a side whose square is equal to the sum of the square of the two other sides' is conditioned by the fact that the triangle under question be a right triangle. It is clear that the rule that is conditioned or relative, in this meaning of the term, is absolute and stable albeit under its own specific conditions and circumstances. This means that assuming that those conditions and circumstances really [and continually] exist the ruling is not susceptible to change. In reality, all of the rules that are related to objective reality are such that in all or certain real conditions they are stable, absolute and unchangeable. Scientific, mathematical and philosophical rules expound the conditions for those rules.

In this way, in our opinion, some of the ethical propositions are absolute while others are conditional and, in this way, relative. The propositions: 'Justice is good' and 'The worship of God is good' are absolute while the proposition: 'Killing another human being is bad' is conditioned with the fact that the human being [to be killed] is innocent and that the killing be contrary to justice. Based upon the idea that all ethical statements are declarative and that they relate something about ethical reality all ethical rules will be based upon realities. In this case it is possible for us to say that the difference between these two

types of ethical rulings is that some of them are only rooted in the primordial nature of man and that they are connected to the original and ultimate purpose of man's existence. Now, since the nature of man and his ultimate purpose are things that cannot change the values that are based upon them are also unchangeable. These are the principle ethical values in the view of Islam.⁴⁵ However, in some other ethical rulings, such as the evil of killing another human being, the subject is such that its evil or goodness depends upon the specific conditions [in which it exists]. When those conditions and circumstances change the goodness or evil of the action [under question] also change. These are conditional ethical rules and it is possible for us to understand them to be relative, in the abovementioned meaning of the term.

However, sometimes relativity means that the ethical rule is not stable or unchangeable under no real conditions whatsoever. This means that the rule is not connected to reality at all such that it might remain stable under certain or all circumstances. Rather it is connected to the personal tastes of individuals or their concord upon some matter. Thus, it is possible that they change no matter what the condition are with which they are expressed. In contrast, absoluteness means that the rule is not connected to the personal interests of individuals or their agreement upon something. Rather, it depends upon its own objective conditions. In our opinion, all ethical rules are absolute in this meaning of the term, like all of the rules of the other objective sciences. This means that the real ethical rules do not depend upon the personal tastes and conventions of individuals and they do not change when such tastes and conventions do.

Finally, we will analyze one ethical statement from the point of view of absoluteness and relativity so that this view may be understood more accurately. For example, the statement: 'Telling the truth is good' is an ethical rule. Is this rule absolute? In other words, is the predicate 'good' always, everywhere and under all conditions true for the subject 'telling the truth'? Is it true for it even if telling the truth leads to the killing of an innocent person? Kant was of the opinion that telling the truth is an absolute value even if it leads to the death of thousands of innocent people. In his opinion if some people ask you: 'Where is the entrance to that city?' you must tell them the correct address even if you know that they want to enter the city so that they can destroy it and kill its inhabitants. He was of the opinion that we must act upon our own personal responsibility and not look at the results that they may lead to.⁴⁶ In any case, telling the truth is absolutely good in the eyes of Kant. Their destructive consequences under some circumstances do not cause it to become insignificant.

Since the ideological foundations of the ethical school of Kant are not acceptable to us we cannot accept his answer to this ethical query. God willing, we will further examine the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's view when we criticize and examine the various ethical schools of thought.

However, keeping in mind Islam's ideological foundations, we can answer this question in two ways. The first is that we say that in cases where telling the truth leads to social evils like the death of innocent people it possesses two characteristics. The first is 'telling the truth' and the other is being 'the cause of

the death'. It is good from the point of view that it is an instance of telling the truth while it is bad from the point of view that it leads to the death of innocent human beings. In reality, it resembles the time when a command and prohibition unite in one action, a topic which is discussed in the science of the Principles of Jurisprudence. In that discussion many Usulis are of the opinion that it is possible for one action to be obligatory taking into consideration one of its characteristics while it is, at the same time, prohibited, keeping in mind its other characteristic.

For example, praying in a stolen land is prohibited from the point of view that it is an instance of stealing and at the same time it is obligatory from the point of view that it is an instance of the ritual prayer. Therefore, since goodness and evil possess degrees it is possible to say that these two characteristics often unite in one action. In this case there are three possible scenarios that can happen: The first is that the amount of goodness it possesses equals the amount of evil in it. In this case the goodness and evil conflict with one another and none of them are actualized.

As a result, this person neither deserves to be praised for this action nor does he deserve to be reprimanded for it. The second possibility is that the degree of goodness be more intense than that of evil. In this case he will deserve to be praised to the extent that the action's goodness outweighs its evil. However, if the level of its evil be more than that of its goodness then he will actually be deserved to be scolded. Therefore, keeping in mind this answer, telling the truth is always good and there is no exception to this rule. Sometimes, however, its goodness is overshadowed by a greater good. Since it is not practically possible for us to perform both good actions [at the same time] reason tells us that one must perform the greater good and forgo the lesser one.

Another answer can be given to this question that, coincidentally, is more in line with our ideological foundations. That answer is this: We must examine the subjects of ethical rules and values more astutely. If we look carefully into the matter, we will see that the universal standard for ethical values is the general and real good of the individual and society. That thing is expedient for man which will cause him to attain perfection and really rectify him spiritually.[47](#)

Therefore, 'telling the truth' is not the subject of an ethical ruling [such as being good] simply from the point of view that it is 'telling the truth'. Rather, it is good from the point of view that it helps man achieve felicity and perfection and creates real goodness for him and the society [in which he exists]. It is also for this reason that if, under certain circumstances, it should lose this function then it will no longer be the subject for the predicate 'good'.

In order to explain: The subjects of ethical rules are not the actions that are performed in the external world. The actions of man are not the subject of ethical rules from the point of view that they possess certain specific quiddities. Rather, they are attributed with goodness or evil from the point of view that they are instances of other abstract concepts. The concept 'telling the truth' is not, in and of itself, an objective one. In the external world that which really exists is simply the movement of the tongue and mouth and the air that exits the throat of the person [telling the truth]. However, the idea that this speech

is an instance of telling the truth or lying is an abstract concept. This means that speaking is, in reality, the cause of making someone understand a concept. That concept must be compared with the external world so that we can understand if it is in accord with it or not. It is keeping this dimension in mind that the ideas of truth or falsehood can be predicated of speaking.

If we look at the matter more precisely then we will see that ‘telling the truth’ is not the subject for an ethical rule even with this characteristic. In other words, ‘goodness’ is not a predicate that is essentially predicated of ‘truth from the point of view that it is truth’. To be more precise, it needs a middle term [for this concept to be predicated of it]. If it is asked why telling the truth is good then in answering this question, we will reach the conclusion that it is expedient for society that the truth be told. This is the middle term or the cause of the predicate being predicated of the subject. Causes generalize and specify [their effects]. Anytime that the benefit of the society lays in a certain action the ruling will also exist [for that action] even if that benefit is acquired through lying. Every action that leads to the destruction of society is bad even if that action be telling the truth.

In other words, this predicate is not essentially related to the subject ‘telling the truth’ rather essentially it hinges upon the benefit or loss that the society may acquire through such an action. It is only accidentally related to speaking the truth. Therefore, the ruling that telling the truth is good is not a logical or rational ruling rather it is a commonplace one. Reason says that this subject has many hidden clauses that can be found if we examine the matter carefully. For example: ‘If telling the truth is to the benefit of society and leads to the real felicity of the individual and the society [he is in] then it is good.’ Therefore, the subject that essentially and principally has such a ruling is absolute and continuous and does not have any exceptions. This subject is an abstract concept that will have this ruling everywhere and in every time that it exists.

In conclusion, ethical propositions are absolute if we discover the clauses of their subjects. Of course, the term ‘the clauses of their subjects’ is not a completely accurate one. If the subject and essential characteristics of a ruling be understood then it will not need a clause. For example, the proposition: ‘Animals laugh’ is not true from the point of view that the predicate is not essential for the subject. If the predicate was essential for the subject, then it would be predicated of all of the instances of the subject. In this proposition some of the instances of the subject are lions, horses and bears and we know that they do not laugh. It is for this reason that if we want to relate this predicate to this subject then we must condition the subject with a clause: ‘The rational animal laughs’. In this proposition if the true subject (i.e. man) is mentioned then it will no longer need a clause and we can unconditionally say: ‘Man laughs.’ In this way, if we mention the essential characteristics in ethical propositions we will no longer stand in need of clauses. We only need clauses when the subject does not essentially dictate a ruling or in other words, the predicate is not essential for the subject.

1. ‘Relativism’ by David Wong, A Companion to Ethics, p. 443–444; Dawrah Athar Aflatun, v. 3, p. 172–173.

2. Nazariyyeh Siyasi Islam, v. 2, p. 251.

3. Nazariyyeh Siyasi Islam, v. 2, p. 251.

- [4.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 227–228
- [5.](#) ‘Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 6, p. 539.
- [6.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 227.
- [7.](#) Ethical Relativism’, by Richard B. Brandt, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 75.
- [8.](#) Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 2, p. 856.
- [9.](#) ‘Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 6, p. 539.
- [10.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 229.
- [11.](#) Tarikh Adabiyat Iran, v. 4, p. 302, footnote.
- [12.](#) Usul Falsafah wa Ravish Realism, v. 1, p. 9.
- [13.](#) Seh Sal dar Iran, p. 12–13.
- [14.](#) See: ‘Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 857.
- [15.](#) See: ‘Relativism’ by David Wong, A Companion to Ethics, p. 442.
- [16.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 227.
- [17.](#) Naqdi bar Nisbiyyat Akhlaq, Louis Puiman, Tr. Mahmud Fathali, Naqd wa Nazar, no 13–14, p. 326–324.
- [18.](#) Naqdi bar Nisbiyyat Akhlaq, Louis Puiman, Tr. Mahmud Fathali, Naqd wa Nazar, no 13–14, p.p. 326–327.
- [19.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 228.
- [20.](#) ‘Ethical Relativism’, by Richard B. Brandt, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 76 and ‘Relativism’ by David Wong, A Companion to Ethics, p. 442–449.
- [21.](#) Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 6, p. 541.
- [22.](#) Ethical Relativism by R.B. Brandt, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 77.
- [23.](#) The History of Philosophy, Copelston, v. 1, p. 144–145.
- [24.](#) See: Moral Relativism by D.B. Wong, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 857–858.
- [25.](#) Refer to: Nazariye Siyasi Islam, v. 2, p. 250–251; Moral Relativism by D.B. Wong, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 857.
- [26.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 229.
- [27.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p. 229.
- [28.](#) Ethics, 1973, William Frankena, p.230; Ethical Relativism by R.B. Brandt, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, v. 3, p. 76–77.
- [29.](#) For more explanation refer to: Nazariye Siyasiye Islam, v. 2, p. 252–254.
- [30.](#) See: ‘Moral Relativism’ by D.B. Wong, The Encyclopedia of Ethics, v. 2, p. 857.
- [31.](#) It often happens that a single Arabic or Persian word has different shades of meanings which must be translated by different English terms such as the word itibari. This can be used to indicate that something is subordinate, or that it is a mere respect or that it lacks entified reality or that it relates to value rather than fact and there are still other meanings for this term. Some translators have chosen to translate this as respectival. We have, however, chosen to explain, in each case, what the term means rather than simply substituting a single word for it. Sometimes, however, we have chosen to simply bring the word itibari itself if explaining the concept might lengthen the sentence sought to be translated. In this case we have indicated what the word intends in a footnote. (Tr.).
- [32.](#) Refer to: Amuzish Falsafah, v. 1, p. 178–179; Taliqah ala Nihayat al Hikmah, p. 22–23; Nihayat al Hikmah, p. 256–259.
- [33.](#) Nihayat al Hikmah p. 9, 258, 10; Majmuaye Athar, Murtadha Mutahhari, v. 5, p. 36.
- [34.](#) The reason for this is that if something is itibari in this meaning of the term then it will nevertheless be real however not essentially and only through the reality of something else that is essentially real. For example, in the debates on the principality of existence or quiddity the adherents of the principality of existence hold that both existence and quiddity are real only that existence is so essentially while the other is so because it is one with existence and because when two things are one the characteristics of one of them are attributed to the other albeit in a secondary yet real manner. In the present discussion however the adherents of the itibari nature of ethical concepts are of the opinion that they are not real at all and partake of no objectivity whatsoever. They depend simply upon the personal tastes and inclinations of the one who conceives them. This is not so of quiddity which although it is itibari is not subjective and is reflected in the mind in an automatic manner for all humans in the same way. Thus, this meaning of itibari is not what is being discussed here. (Tr.).

- [35.](#) It is famous that in the Age of Ignorance the buyer and seller of a commodity would shake hands when performing a business transaction. The term *Safaqah* that is mentioned in the religious traditions and historical documents refer to this as well as the phrase, 'May God put much bounty in the shaking of your right hand.'
- [36.](#) Dawrah Athar Aflatun, v. 1, (Gorgias, 470), p. 295.
- [37.](#) A History of Philosophy, Copleston, v. 1, p. 132.
- [38.](#) A History of Philosophy, Copleston, v. 1, p. 249–256.
- [39.](#) A History of Philosophy, Copleston, v. 1, p. 145.
- [40.](#) Amil ya Amuzish wa Parwarish, Russo, Tr. Zirakzadeh, p. 201–202.
- [41.](#) Refer to: Bunyad Ma Bad Tabiyyah Akhlaq, p. 20–27 and p. 62–63.
- [42.](#) Bunyad Ma Bad Tabiyyah Akhlaq, p. 61.
- [43.](#) Bunyad Ma Bad Tabiyyah Akhlaq, p. 37 and 67.
- [44.](#) Bunyad Ma Bad Tabiyyah Akhlaq, p. 60, 74, 88, 91.
- [45.](#) For further clarification of the matter refer to: Nazariyye Siyasi Islam, v. 2, p. 252–257.
- [46.](#) Bunyad Ma Bad at Tabiyyah Akhlaq, p. 25–26.
- [47.](#) Pish Niyazhaye Mudiryat Islami, p. 165–166.

Chapter 9: The Relation Of Religion To Ethics

Introduction

The relation of religion to ethics is one of the most interesting and yet difficult discussions and one that has a history as long as philosophy and religion itself. Throughout history, philosophers from one side, and religious individuals, from the other, have found themselves face to face with this question: What is principle, ethics or religion? In other words, is religion the source of ethics or is ethics the source of religion? Is God bound to follow ethical rules or is ethics bound to the will of God? Is it possible to speak of ethics if God did not exist? In this case would it be possible to live morally? Or, would it be true to say, in the words of DastaYuski, that: 'If God did not exist then everything would be lawful.' In other words, does a materialistic world view necessarily lead to a self-indulgent way of life? Or is it possible to speak of ethics even without religion and religious beliefs? How does religion need ethics? How is ethics connected to religion? Can we say that ethics is a part of religion? Are they completely separated or do they cooperate with one another? Are they organically linked with one another?

These are some of the most important questions that have always preoccupied the minds of the philosophers of ethics in the past and even today. Each one of them has presented answers to these questions based upon his own viewpoints and has attempted to solve these questions keeping in mind his own special stance on religion and ethics. In this chapter we will also attempt to expound our own view on this matter while presenting a general outline of the different views on religion and ethics. However, before this can be done it is fitting that we relate a history of this discussion so that we can get a better acquaintance with the presentation of this discussion in the books of the Islamic scholars and also remind ourselves of its extraordinary importance in the eyes of preceding and contemporary

scholars.

A History Of The Discussion

As we have previously mentioned the problem of the connection of religion with ethics (like many other philosophical and ethical problems) has been discussed by philosophers and theologians from the time humans have begun to think philosophically. The beginning of this debate is a conversation between Socrates and Asifron that has been related by Plato. [1](#) In this conversation Socrates asks Asifron: 'Does something become good because God commands it or does God command something because it is good?' In this way Socrates laid the ground for a topic that, for 25 centuries, was always the subject of debate between the philosophers of ethics, theologians and theosophists. Some have chosen the first option and thus have adhered to religious ethics and some others have chosen the second and have stated that ethics is independent of religion.

Right until the modern era (i.e. the Renaissance) most of the Christian thinkers believed in the harmony between religion and ethics[2](#). Most scholars strove to derive ethical rules from the Bible. However, it seems that Christianity does not have a complete ethical system and that the Bible only contains a series of ethical admonitions the most important of which are the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

In the words of McIntyre:

'Jesus and Paul had invented a type of ethical system that was intended [to be implemented] for a limited time period; [that is] before God could initiate the promised kingdom and before [the mundane] history could come to an end. Therefore, one should not expect to find in their sayings the foundations for life in an eternal [and divine] society. Aside from this, in no way did Jesus wish to present an [ethical] constitution that was essentially independent rather his purpose was to reform the ethics of the Pharisees.'[3](#)

At the same time, the Christian scholars before the Renaissance, especially Augustine and Aquinas, always strove to lay the ideological foundations of Christian Ethics upon the philosophical principles of Plato, Aristotle, the Neo-Platonic thinkers and the Stoics.[4](#)

Before the Renaissance, Christianity, which was the most popular religion in the west, ruled over all of the dimensions of people's lives. This included the scientific, cultural, social, political and ethical dimensions of their lives. However, after the Renaissance, the downfall of the Fathers of the Church and the spread of a sentiment of animosity towards religion a scientific and rational spirit gradually gained sway over all of the dimensions of people's lives and thus replaced the inclinations towards God and religion. There was a tendency towards humanism and the spirit of human beings became more attached to this ideology. This was so to such an extent that someone like August Cont announced that the era of religion had passed[5](#) but ironically concocted a humanistic religion in order to fill the spiritual

void that people felt because of religion's passing.[6](#)

Of course, the intellectual and cultural upheavals that occurred after the Renaissance went through ups and downs and gave birth to various and often conflicting lines of thought. It is for this reason that it never moved in one direction. This movement continues even today and there are still disagreeing and contradictory lines of thought in all of the various cultural and philosophical fields. It seems that, unfortunately, the works of western scholars that are translated in Iran all have one specific line of thought. Most of them are atheistic and anti-religious. However, the reality of the matter is something totally different in the western world.

In any case, aside from all of the anti-religious and anti-ethical movements, the problem of religion and ethics has been one of the most important preoccupations of contemporary philosophers. Even the atheistic and anti-religious philosophers devoted much time to this problem. Individuals such as Niche (1844–1900), Marx (1818–1883) and J. L. Mackie are glaring examples of this group. This [renewed interest in the relation of ethics and religion] has breathed new life into this problem in recent centuries. A large amount of the religious and ethical research conducted by the western philosophers has been allocated to this matter.

However, the problem of the relation of religion to ethics has not been discussed as an independent topic in the Islamic World to the extent that it has in the West. Why is it that these problems have been examined more in the West than in the Islamic world? Why is it that many books have been written in this regard there and not over here? Why have these topics been discussed more in Western countries while in the Islamic world this was not so? This is something that needs to be examined from a sociological point of view. However, if we want to present an optimistic answer to these questions then we must say that in the Islamic countries there was not much need felt to examine this topic.

This was due to Islam and the popularity of the Islamic ethos, especially the teachings of the Family of The Prophet (s). For Islamic societies religious and ethical matters were self-evident. It was not important as to what place religion has in ethics and what place ethics has in religion. Nor was the relation of religion and ethics or the principality of one over the other significant for Muslims. At the same time, we must admit that we as Muslims have not examined these matters as they deserve to have been examined. Now that the Islamic Revolution has been victorious and Islamic issues are being presented in such a way that everyone is turning their attention to an inquiry of the foundations of the Islamic sciences, we hope that these issues will once again find their proper place in Islamic Philosophical research.[7](#)

It should not be left unsaid that in the various theological and usuli books some discussions can be found here and there regarding this subject. For example, the problem of 'the beauty and evil of actions' (which was brought up from the very onset of the genesis of theological discussions amongst Muslims) is, in reality, the same problem that has been the principal topic of debate amongst the philosophers of ethics from the time of Ancient Greece until today (i.e. the relation of religion and ethics). Of course, the

real objective of the Muslim theologians in bringing up this issue was something else entirely.

However, the discussions that were conducted [regarding other matters] perfectly delineate their stance on this issue. The Adliyyah believe that God commands good actions and prohibits evil ones because of an essential goodness and evil than inheres in them. In this way they have, in reality, expressed a certain objective independence of ethics from religion. In contrast, the Ashaira hold that the command and prohibitions of God cause actions to objectively become good or bad. In truth, they have surmised that ethics depends upon religion. Also, most of the Adliyyah are of the opinion that the intelligence of man can understand the goodness or evil of at least some actions independent of [the guidance of] religion. However, apparently the Ashaira hold that without the help of religion reason does not have the power to comprehend the goodness or evil of any action whatsoever.[8](#)

This theological and ethical issue entered the Usuli debates in recent centuries and the hair-splitting research of the Usulis has enriched it tremendously.[9](#) A treasure-trove of wisdom has thus been prepared whose comprehension can open up new horizons for philosophers of ethics and solve many of the complexities of this subject matter. However, it seems that this topic has not reached an acceptable conclusion and that it still needs a more serious examination.

An Examination Of A Few Views

In one way we can group all of the views regarding the relation between religion and ethics into three general categories. 1. Exclusion. 2. Unity. 3. Cooperation. Some are of the opinion that the jurisdiction of religion and ethics are completely separate from one another and that there is no relation between them whatsoever. Another group understands the relation between religion and ethics to be an organic one and say that they are in reality one entity. A third view is that even though religion and ethics each possesses an independent jurisdiction they are related and reciprocally influence each other. In the forthcoming discussion we wish to expound these views in detail and then to criticize and evaluate them. Lastly, we hope to present our own view on this issue.

The Mutual Exclusion Of Ethics And Religion

According to this view, religion and ethics are two separate entities and each of them possesses its own independent sphere of influence. They are not related to one another in any way whatsoever. They resemble two circles that do not meet at any point at all. If sometimes it may appear that religious and ethical matters meet with one another then this is accidental and by chance. There is, however, no logical connection between them. This resembles two travelers that are journeying to two distinct goals and happen to meet each other by chance. This does not imply that there is some logical connection between them.[10](#)

In the view of the adherents of this theory religion is related to the relation that man has with God. Ethics, on the other hand, is an expression of the relation that human beings have with one another.

Therefore, religion and ethics do not have a common subject matter. Some have taken a step further and have said that religion and religious beliefs are a hindrance to ethics and that they cause it to gradually terminate. 'The relation of ethics to religion may possibly destroy ethics. The reason for this is that with the destruction of religious beliefs ethics comes to life.'¹¹

Nitche (1844–1900) is a famous adherent of this way of thinking. He was of the belief that it is only with the 'death of God' and the freedom of human beings from the shackles of religion that the path to proper ethical conduct may be opened up. He was of the assumption that the concept of God is an enemy of life. It was for this reason that he stated: 'By foregoing the faith in God it is possible for the powers of creativity to open up in man. The God of Christianity no longer gets in our way with his commands and prohibitions. No longer are the eyes of humanity fixated upon an imaginary supernatural world as opposed to this [real] one [that we are in].'¹² He stated: Christianity makes us accept the life of slaves.¹³ This is while fear, meekness and the likes of these are ethically unacceptable. Ethics should make human beings more powerful and active.

Based upon this take on religion and ethics aside from possessing a separate jurisdiction they do not possess a common goal. The goal of religion is to make human beings god-like, to help them transcend themselves and to satisfy their desire to worship God. The goal of ethics, on the other hand is to present commands and prohibitions that can rectify the social relations of human beings.

It should be noted that the belief in the complete separation of religion and ethics is not solely relegated for the atheists and opponents of religion rather some of the believers and religious individuals such as Kierkegaard are of the belief that as long as one holds on to ethics it is impossible for him to acquire real faith in God. The latter requires a 'leap of faith'. For example, if Abraham had followed the ethical ruling stating the impermissibility of killing one's child he would never have acquired real faith. Religious faith implies a certain blind submission and the freedom from the shackles of the powers of reason. Even though ethics possesses a certain amount of transcendence it is still bound to the faculty of reason which always keeps its own best interests in mind.

He believed in three stages for the human spirit.¹⁴ Passing from one stage to the other occurs through a choice and the power of will. This means that one must choose one of the options laid out in front of you and that too the one that is the best. The first stage is that of the senses. The distinction of this stage is that one's persona is scattered in the sensible phenomena. The second stage is the ethical stage. In this phase 'man submits to specific ethical standards of goodness and the responsibilities that ethics dictate to us. This is the voice of everyone's reason. In this way he bestows a certain form and organization to his life.'¹⁵ A simple example of the passing from the sensible stage to the ethical one for Kierkegaard is marriage. Man marries instead of satisfying his urges through fleeting pleasures. Marriage is an ethical institution. The third stage is the stage of faith and the connection with God.

In order to demonstrate the difference between the ethical stage and the stage of faith he gives the example of Abraham. The hero of the ethical stage sacrifices himself for an ethical law. Abraham,

however, is the hero of the stage of faith. In the words of Kierkegaard, Abraham does not work for some universal ethical law. He is of the opinion that in this phase 'ethics are irrelevant.'¹⁶ Of course, apparently, he does not mean that 'religion negates ethics. Rather he means that the man of faith is completely connected to God whose requests are absolute and cannot be measured by the human mind.'¹⁷

The Theory Of Unity Between Religion And Ethics

The second general view regarding the relation of religion and ethics can be named the 'theory of unity'. According to this view the relation between these two is organic and one of them is a part of the other. In the opinion of most Muslim thinkers, religion is 'the collection of beliefs, ethics rules and laws that God has revealed to the prophets for the guidance of human beings and in order to secure their worldly and other-worldly felicity.' Therefore, the jurisdiction of ethics is not completely separate from that of religion. Rather, it is a part of the whole that is religion. If we compare religion to a tree then beliefs will be its branches. Ethics will be its trunk and rules will be its branches and leaves. It is clear that the trunk of a tree is not separate from the tree itself rather the trunk is a part of the tree.¹⁸

In other words, based upon this take on religion, the relation between religion and ethics is one of absolute generality and peculiarity. This is like two circles one of which is smaller than the other and is contained in the one that is bigger than it. It is only natural that in this case all of the parts of the smaller circle are parts of the bigger circle.

The Theory Of Cooperation

The third opinion is that religion and ethics each possesses its own persona however they cooperate with one another. There is something of a logical connection between them like the connection between a cause and its effect.¹⁹ This means that both ethics and religion are connected to one another in different ways. The acceptance of some religious propositions depends upon the acceptance of some ethical concepts and statements and the definition of some ethical concepts, the acceptance of some ethical propositions and the comprehension of many particular ethical rulings depend upon religion and religious propositions. All of the individuals that enumerate the dependencies of religion upon ethics and all of the people that emphasize the connection between them have, in some way, adhered to the theory of the cooperation between religion and ethics.

This theory possesses within itself many more particular views that we will hereunder point out under the two general headings of the dependency of ethics upon religion and the dependencies of religion upon ethics. By doing so we will show some of the different ways in which these two entities cooperate with one another.

The Ways In Which Religion Depends Upon Ethics

Ethics And The Knowledge Of God

One of the most popular and maybe most important proofs for the necessity of knowing God (which has been mentioned in most of the theological books) is that it is [ethically] necessary to thank someone who has done you a favor. Since God has granted us many favors and since all of the blessings that are at our disposal are from God, it is ethically necessary to thank him. Of course, thanking someone demands that we recognize who he is and until we do, we cannot thank him. Thus, the necessity of knowing God depends upon the acceptance of an ethical ruling which is: 'Thanking someone who has done you a favor is obligatory.'[20](#)

What is more, many of the western philosophers have striven to prove God using ethical demonstrations.[21](#) It seems that Kant was the first person to utilize such demonstrations to prove God. He understood all of the proofs of the theoretical intellect to be barren in this regard and was of the belief that the practical intellect and the ethical rules necessarily lead us to admit the existence of God and some other religious beliefs such as the subsistence of the soul. Therefore, in the view of Kant the belief in God and the acceptance of the soul's eternality depends upon an ethical awareness and the practical intellect.[22](#) Some of the defenders of this proof have sought to prove an eternal and absolute commander and prohibiter (i.e. God) from the stability and absoluteness of ethical commands and prohibitions. They did this in this way:

The ethical commands and prohibitions demand the existence of some being that has commanded and prohibited them. Such a being cannot be the individual himself or other human beings. Rather a source higher than human beings must exist, named God, who is the source of ethical obligations and prohibitions.[23](#) Some others have tried to prove the divine lawmaker by means of the ethical rules.[24](#)

A very popular form of the ethical argument runs as follows: Ethical values are objective entified realities in the external world. Their creator must either be material or immaterial. Matter is incapable of creating ethical values. Immaterial beings are either human or beings that transcend humans. Human beings cannot be the creators of ethical values since human beings cease to exist while ethical values are perennial. This shows us that there is a being higher than the human being that is the creator of ethical values. This being is none other than God.[25](#)

In any case, all of the individuals that have taken recourse to ethical demonstrations to prove God have emphasized, knowingly or not, the dependency of religion upon ethics.

Ethics And The Worship Of God

Another way in which religion depends upon ethics (and which is rooted in the theological and ethical books) is that it is ethics that makes us responsible for performing the religious duties. Religion is based

upon the worship of God. The question is: What is it that obliges us to worship and serve Him? In answer to this question, it is said: God is our Creator. He Therefore, has the right to be worshipped and He is our Master. We are His slaves and have been created by Him and Therefore, must observe His rights over us. The way to do this is to worship Him. In the words of Imam Zayn al Abidin (s) the greatest right that God has over man is the right to be worshipped.

فَأَمَّا حَقُّ اللَّهِ الْأَكْبَرُ عَلَيْكَ فَأَنْ تَعْبُدَهُ لَا تُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا

‘However, the greatest right of God over you is that you worship Him and that you do not associate anything with Him.’²⁶

Therefore, it is an ethical ruling that causes us to turn towards religion and to observe our religious responsibilities. This ethical rule states: ‘One must observe the rights that others have over you.’²⁷

Ethics And The Goal Of Religion

Another one of the principal ways in which religion needs ethics is related to the goal of religion. Religion claims that it has come to [spiritually] cultivate man and to secure his worldly and other worldly felicity. It is for this reason that one of the goals of religion is to organize the personal and social life of man. This can only be done by means of a collection of special ethical rulings. Consequently, it is possible to say that religion cannot accomplish its goals without ethics and thus it cannot, without ethics, secure the worldly and other worldly felicity of man.

Ethics And The Propagation Of Religion

Without a doubt, good morals and religious conduct is one of the most important and tested methods for propagating religion. Therefore, religion needs ethics in order for it to spread.

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ

‘It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: So pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah’s) forgiveness for them and consult them in affairs (of the moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision put thy trust in Allah; for Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).’ (3: 159).

Ethics And The Meaninglessness Of Religious Propositions

In the writings of some western thinkers another one of the ways in which religion needs ethics has been mentioned: If religious propositions are to be significant, they must be reduced to ethical propositions.

One of the most famous proponents of this view is R.B. Braithwaite. He was profoundly influenced by the logical positivists and their standard for the significance of propositions. According to this standard, only those propositions are meaningful which either express logical realities or are proven through [scientific] experimentation. At the same time however, one of his principle scholarly preoccupations was the significance of religious propositions. Braithwaite said that the standard of the Logical Positivists was useless for the assessment of religious and ethical propositions. Their meaning, he stated, must be examined keeping in mind the manner in which the phrases [and concepts] employed in them are utilized.

Based upon this, he sought out the manner in which religious propositions are used. In the end, he reached the conclusion that religious propositions are, in reality, [used as] ethical propositions. It is for this reason that it is easily possible to transform them into ethical propositions. An ethical proposition expresses the reason why the speaker has acted in a certain way and this is also the primary usage of religious rulings.

Religious rules and phrases are expressions that communicate the fact that their speaker follows a specific code of conduct. In the opinion of Braithwaite only a small portion of religion cannot easily be reduced to ethics and these are stories that resemble fables that have been expressed in order to support religious propositions. Of course, in the end he also explains away these as well. [28](#)

Aside from the many serious objections that can be leveled against the premises of this view on the standard of the significance of propositions in particular the following objections can be raised in regards to the significance of religious propositions in general.

1. It is keeping in mind the goal that they have (i.e. securing the eternal felicity of man), that heavenly religions such as Islam oblige their adherents to accept, aside from ethical commands and rules, certain beliefs. The acceptance of such beliefs is a part and parcel of faith. Such beliefs are not superstitions or fables, rather concrete realities that support and give direction to actions. For example, the belief in a Single Deity with His attributes of Absolute Perfection makes proximity to Him the ultimate goal of ethics and the standard for value in the ethical system of Islam. It is also the source of [all] legitimacy and rights in the legal system of Islam. This being is discussed in Islamic philosophy as a real entity that is the source of the existence of all other beings.

Also, the belief in the Resurrection and the subsistence of the human soul [after death] is brought up as a philosophical and theological topic. It also has many consequences in ethics. The same goes for the other religious beliefs such as Prophethood, revelation and the likes of these. These are all objective realities not fables or legends. Of course, the problem of the language that religion uses and the significance of religious propositions is a lengthy topic. An examination of all of the dimensions of this subject demands another opportunity altogether.

2. Many of the rules of the Shariah cannot be simply reduced to ethical propositions. The stipulations of

religion in punishments, blood money, judgment and legal issues as well as economical matters and business transactions and even the rites of worship are not ethical evaluations.

In conclusion, we cannot accept the fact that religion needs ethics in order for its propositions to be significant [and that without it they would be meaningless].

The Ways In Which Ethics Needs Religion

In reality, the axis around which religious and ethical discussions in the West revolve is the examination of the ways in which ethics needs religion. From another point of view, the adherents of religious ethics have always tried to show the ways in which ethics needs religion. They have done this by showing the connection of ethics to religion in its concepts and intentions. From another point of view, the adherents of secular ethics have tried to prove that ethics does not depend upon religion and have surmised that the jurisdiction of ethics is completely detached from that of religion.

As we have pointed out earlier, some of them have understood religion and religious beliefs to be detrimental for ethics. The supporters of religious ethics have used the Divine Command Theory for the most part to prove that ethics needs religion in order to define the concepts it utilizes and also for the affirmation of its propositions. They are of the opinion that even the comprehension of ethical propositions is something that stands in need of religion. What is more, the supporters of religious ethics say that religion and religious beliefs are necessary in order to practice ethical rules and in this way, they have emphasized the dependency of ethics upon religion.

In this section we will point some of the most important ways in which ethics depends upon religion.[29](#)

The Definition Of Ethical Concepts

As we have pointed out in the second chapter, there are three distinct viewpoints regarding the definition of ethical concepts. These are the Intuitivist theories, the Definitivist theories and the non-Cognitivist theories. The Definitivist theories are those that understand ethical concepts as being capable of being defined and analyzed. This group comprises a wide range of different views and can be in turn divided in a general way into Naturalist and Metaphysical theories. The first define ethical concepts by using natural and physical concepts. The second group has tried to define them based upon philosophical and theological concepts.

The adherents of the Divine Command Theory are of the opinion that ethical concepts can only be defined if we return them to the command and prohibition of God. In their opinion 'the good deed' is 'the deed that has been commanded by God' and the 'evil deed' is 'the deed that has been prohibited by God'. Based upon this outlook, ethics needs religion and religious propositions even in the definition of the concepts it utilizes. The reason for this is that if God did not exist (the belief in God) or if He did but did not command or prohibit anything (the belief in revelation and prophethood) the concepts 'good',

'bad' and the likes of these would be meaningless. Of course, as we have pointed out in its own proper place, we do not accept this view and are of the opinion that we do not need religion and religious propositions in order to understand the meaning of good and bad.[30](#)

The Specification Of Ethical Values

Another one of the ways in which ethics needs religion is that it is religion that delineates ethical values. Of course, there are different views regarding the manner in which we can distinguish acceptable and ethically valuable actions from unacceptable and neutral ones. In the fifth chapter we have pointed out some of them. When we want to see what must be done and what must not be done it is asked as to how is it that we understand the goodness and evil of actions in the first place. What are the boundaries separating goodness and evil? Under what circumstances will a certain action be good and under what conditions will it be evil? Who is it that will distinguish good actions from evil ones? Some are of the opinion that here again ethics needs religion. It is religion that must evaluate actions. In other words, it is with the help of divine revelation and the knowledge imparted to us by the Friends of God that we can delineate the value of actions. By them we can assess which actions are desirable and have ethical value and conversely which actions lack ethical value and are immoral.[31](#)

This view can be considered to be partially correct. In other words, the delineation of the ethical value of many of the particular actions of human beings needs religion and religious propositions. The human mind cannot distinguish all ethical virtues on its own. At the same time, it does have the ability to distinguish some of the principle ethical virtues and vices without the recourse to religion and religious beliefs such as the goodness of justice and the evil of oppression.

Distinguishing The Goal Of Ethical Virtues

Another one of the ways in which ethics needs religion is in the fact that ethics needs religion in order to distinguish the goal of ethical actions and virtues. To explain, the basis of values is the goals of actions and conduct. In other words, the value of ethical conduct is bound up with its goals and aims. Since we have sacred goals that are essentially desirable for us, we must perform actions that can help us attain those sacred goals. It is here that ethical values come into existence. It is keeping this point in mind that it is said that the goal of man is to attain proximity to God. This is the loftiest goal in man's journey towards spiritual perfection. The value of ethical conduct lies in the fact that they either directly cause us to attain such a proximity or they help pave the way for such proximity.

Based upon this, the relation of religion with ethics and the connection of ethics with religion are explained in this way: God is understood through religion and is introduced as the goal of man's spiritual transformation. It is from here that ethical values come into existence. In other words, if religion did not exist or did not teach us about God ethical values would lack substance. In conclusion, even though ethics and religion have separate jurisdictions religion still pays a great service to ethics in that it

delineates the lofty goal of all ethical values.[32](#)

Guaranteeing The Execution Of Ethical Values

Without a doubt, contrary to the claims of Socrates, the comprehension of which actions are good and which are evil is not the sufficient cause for carrying them out or shunning them. It is possible that someone properly comprehends ethical virtues and nevertheless shuns them. What is more, the psyche of human beings is such that as long as they are not encouraged or threatened, they usually do not have any ambitions to do something good or keep away from something evil.[33](#)

Therefore, it is possible to say that without religion and some of the religious teachings (such as the belief in the justice of God, the existence of the Afterlife wherein the actions of humans will be weighed) most people would not act upon ethical principles and values. In reality, people seek out their own best interests and are selfish in all fields, even ethics. There are not many human beings that act upon ethical and religious principles simply because they feel that they are true or because they love God. Many act morally out of a desire for Heaven and its blessings and many others because they fear Hell and its punishments. It is for this reason that they do good deeds and shun evil ones.

Without a doubt, religion can impel human beings towards acting upon ethical values by showing them their worldly and other worldly consequences and the benefits of their conduct. Religion actualizes ethical values in human beings by promising them the greatest of blessings if they act morally and threatening them with the most horrifying of punishments if they act immorally. Fundamentally speaking, some ethical virtues (such as self-sacrifice) are not rationally justifiable without recourse to religion and religious teachings. Self-sacrifice cannot be reasonably justified in any way whatsoever based upon a materialistic outlook on life.

The Impossibility Of A Secular Ethics

In order to reinforce the dependency of ethics upon religion, sometimes it is said that ethics is meaningless for the person who does not believe in religion or the supernatural realm. This is because a series of immaterial values are mentioned in ethics. Such values often have no material benefit for man. If someone did not believe in anything other than matter and the material realm, how would it be possible for him to accept such immaterial values?

However, to be fair, ethics (in the meaning in which it is mentioned in various ideologies) is not such that it always depends upon religion. The ethical schools of thought that are founded upon the principality of pleasure, benefit, society or conscience do not depend upon religion in any way whatsoever. Even the materialists can accept an ethics based upon these ideological foundations and say that even though ethical concepts are immaterial concepts they are founded upon matter and nature. [They could say that] when matter reaches a certain stage of complexity and perfection it gains the ability to comprehend such concepts. It accepts a social way of life, the customs and traditions of society and assigns values to

them.

Aside from the falsehood of such an ideology, when we discuss ethics proper it is not possible for us to say that if someone does not believe in God or the Resurrection it is not possible for him to accept any ethical viewpoint whatsoever. Therefore, we cannot deny the possibility that a secular ethical school of thought can logically exist. If there is an objection to them then it lies in their philosophical world view. In other words, without religion it is still possible to have an ethics, albeit on a lower scale. This is what is observed in the West. However, it is impossible for us to have a perfect ethical system that purports to help man achieve absolute perfection without the acceptance of religion.

An Explanation Of Our View

Up to now we have explained three general views regarding the relation of religion with ethics and now the time has come for us to explain our own view on the subject.³⁴ It seems that the most important step in this matter is the definition of both religion and ethics. We have previously seen that each one of the abovementioned views had a unique definition and take on these two phenomena. This is what caused them to present distinct views on the relation of religion to ethics. Those who adhered to the exclusiveness of religion and ethics had a special definition of religion and ethics. In the opinion of the adherents of this ideology being religious implies that one recognizes God, believes in Him and worships Him.

This incorrect take on religion is what has created secular ethics and secular inclinations in the West. The common take on religion in the West (with the exception of some Catholic schools of thought) is that religion has no connection whatsoever with other matters. They understand religion to be some kind of feeling and inclination that man has towards God. In order to satisfy this inclination, it is necessary for man to go to a temple or church. In no way is it possible to prove that the thing to which this feeling is attached [i.e. God] is real. It is simply a feeling and personal experience within man.

These people understand ethics in relation to man's social conduct. Ethics are the values that are mentioned in regards to the social conduct of man. For example, the manner in which human beings should deal with one another is mentioned in ethics. Human beings must be kind to one another, smile when they meet, act properly, tell the truth and observe justice. All of these things are instances of ethics. Of course, it is possible for us to understand some of these values to be the basis of the other ethical values. In any case, the jurisdiction of ethics is limited to the social dealings of human beings. It is only natural that if our take on religion and ethics be such, we will no longer be able to talk about the relation between the two. Ethics will discuss the relation of human beings with one another while religion will discuss the relation of human beings with God.

It seems that the fundamental flaw of this view lies in this incorrect take on religion and ethics. The jurisdiction of ethics is not limited to the social relations of human beings. Also, it does not simply include the characteristics of their souls. Rather, any action or quality of the soul that can be praised or scorned

and which possesses some ethical value falls within the jurisdiction of ethics. This includes those that are related to the relation that human beings have with one another, the relation that they have with God or even the way that he deals with himself and Nature.

Religion is also not limited to the explanation of man's relation with God. In the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Family (s) thousands of other matters have been expounded which are related to different fields. This includes personal, social and international matters. All of these things are part of religion. Of course, the religion that we are taking into consideration is the true one and which rests upon the uncorrupted revelation of God. This is none other than Islam not everything that goes by the name of religion in this world. A casual glance at the Islamic texts indicates that Islam has concerned itself with all of these matters. One of the striking characteristics about Islam is that it comprises beliefs, ethics and rules. Therefore, religion includes all of the dimensions of man's life and is not limited to the relation that man has with God.

Of course, it must be kept in mind that the rules of arithmetic, geometry and physics for example are not a part of religion. The cause-and-effect relationship that exist between physical and chemical phenomena are not related to religion. Of course, all of these things play a role in the life of man and are in some way instrumental in his spiritual perfection. This dimension of their spiritual value finds its way into religion. In one way it is possible to claim that nothing falls outside religion. Every phenomenon in this Universe has an ethical value in the eyes of religion. To say the least it will be religiously permissible, a ruling that must be given by religion.

A more acceptable view in our eyes is that ethics is a part of religion. This means that we consider the relation between religion and ethics to be an organic one. This resembles the relation of the trunk of the tree with the tree as a whole. Religion is like a tree the roots of which are beliefs, the trunk of which is ethics and the branches and leaves of which are rules.

It should be recounted that sometimes ethics implies those issues and predicates (aside from the view that religion has about ethics or the method by means of which it assesses the value of ethics) in which case it is possible to say that religion and ethics have two separate fields of influence. This is such that it is possible for someone to have an ethical code of conduct without necessarily believing in any religion. Based upon this view ethics is not necessarily a part of religion. If we define ethics in this way the relation between ethics and religion will be one of partial inclusion.

Another point that must be mentioned in the end is that based upon the analysis that we presented for ethical concepts and propositions (i.e. we understood them to be an expression of the objective relation between the freely-willed actions of men and the ultimate perfection that is his goal) ethics will not depend upon religion. This means that, in principle, no specific type of belief has been taken into consideration in this viewpoint. It is possible that someone accept this view without accepting religion or religious commandments.

However, when we wish to understand the ultimate perfection of man and the relation that man's freely-willed actions have with that perfection we are in dire need of religion. We need the principles and beliefs of religion as well as the content of revelation and prophecy. In order to explain: It is possible that everyone has his own special analysis of perfection. For example, in the opinion of Aristotle, the ultimate perfection of man is to harmonize the faculties of anger, passion and the intellect and to place the intellect in command of the rest of the faculties. Some others say that it lies in man's harmony with his surroundings.

However, in our opinion (which we have proven in its own proper place) the ultimate perfection of man is his closeness to God. Therefore, if we wish to delineate the ultimate perfection of man, we have no option but to bring up God. It is here that this view becomes connected to religious beliefs. Also, if we wish to distinguish what actions are good and thus related to the ultimate perfection of man the problem of the soul's subsistence after death must be kept in mind. In this case if there is ever a conflict between material perfections and immaterial ones, we can prefer the later over the former. In cases such as this we say that such and such an action is bad but not because it cannot bring about a material perfection for us rather from the point of view that it gets in the way with another spiritual perfection. Therefore, it is necessary to also have some sort of belief in the Resurrection as well.

What is more, the intellect only has the ability to comprehend in a general way the relation that man's actions have with his ultimate perfection. Such general concepts are useless in distinguishing the particular instances of ethical rules. For example, the intellect understands that justice is good. It is, however, unclear for it as to what is just in each instance and how our conduct will be just in different situations. The intellect cannot independently fathom such matters. For example: Should the rights of men and women be perfectly equal in society or should there be some difference between them? If there should be some difference between them how much should this be and in which cases? It is clear that human reason does not have the ability to unravel these matters on its own. The reason for this is that it is only when it has a grasp of all of the intricate connections between the actions of men and their ultimate consequences as well as their worldly and other worldly effects that it can grasp such a matter. Such a comprehensive knowledge is not possible for an ordinary human mind. Therefore, in order for us to understand the particular instances of ethical rules we once again stand in need of religion. It is revelation that explains to us ethical rules in specific instances, with all of their conditions and limitations. The intellect cannot accomplish this task on its own.

In conclusion, our view as regards to ethical concepts and propositions, in its total form, needs the principle religious beliefs (the belief in God, the Afterlife and Revelation) as well as the content of revelation and the commandments of religion. It is only natural that we say that ethics is not separate from religion in any case. Neither is it separate from religious beliefs nor from religious rules. Not only is it not separate from religion rather in no instant does it not need religion. Therefore, in our opinion we need religion in order to delineate the ultimate perfection of man, the standard of ethical value and to specify which actions are ethically valuable, detrimental or neutral.

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- [4.](#) 'History of Western Ethics: 5. Early Medieval', Scott Davis; 'History of Western Ethics: 6. Later Medieval', Scott MacDonald, *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, v. 1, p. 480–490.
- [5.](#) *Sayr Hikmah dar Urupa*, v. 3, p. 114–119.
- [6.](#) *Sayr Hikmah dar Urupa*, p. 129–133
- [7.](#) *Din wa Akhlaq*, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat*, no 13, p. 31.
- [8.](#) See chapter 4 of this book.
- [9.](#) *Matarih al Anzar*, p. 230; *al Mahsul fi Usul al Fiqh*, v. 1, p. 123; *al Tahsil min al Mahsul*, v. 1, p. 180; *al Fawaed*, p. 330–337; *Nihayah al Dirayah*, v. 2, p. 44, p. 318–319; *Durus fi Ilm al usul*, v. 1, p. 361–362; *Usul al Fiqh*, v. 1, 199–216.
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- [12.](#) *A History of Philosophy*, Copleston, v. 7, p. 393–394.
- [13.](#) *Tarikh Falsafah Garb*, p. 1044.
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- [18.](#) *Din wa Akhlaq*, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat*, no 13, p. 32.
- [19.](#) *Din wa Akhlaq*, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat*, no 13, p. 32.
- [20.](#) *Din wa Akhlaq*, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat*, no 13, p. 33.
- [21.](#) *Khuda dar Falsafah*, p. 97–110.
- [22.](#) Kant, Copleston, p. 171; *Khuda da Falsafah*, p. 103–104; *Tarikh Falsafah Gharb*, p. 971–972; *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 110.
- [23.](#) *Khuda dar Falsafah*, p. 98.
- [24.](#) *Khuda dar Falsafah*, p. 99; *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 102.
- [25.](#) *Aql wa Itiqad Dini*, p. 163–165; *Mere Christianity*, p. 34.
- [26.](#) *Bihar al-Anwar*, v. 71, *al Huquq*, p. 3.
- [27.](#) *Din wa Akhlaq*, Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat*, no 13, p. 33.
- [28.](#) *Morality and Religion*: W.W. Bartley the 3rd, ch 2, p. 17–33.
- [29.](#) 'How Could Ethics Depend on Religion?' Jonathan Berg, *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 525–533; *Religion and Morality*, Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, p. 20.
- [30.](#) See ch 4 of this book.
- [31.](#) 'Din wa Akhlaq', Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat* no 13, p. 34.
- [32.](#) 'Din wa Akhlaq', Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Qabasat* no 13, p. 34.
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